60

The WIZARD

FEB. '41

Adventures in Money Making

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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14/26

LIQUID GOLD

by Phil R. Sheridan

A CASH GORMAN COMPLETE NOVEL

10 CENTS
12c IN CANADA

FEB • 1941

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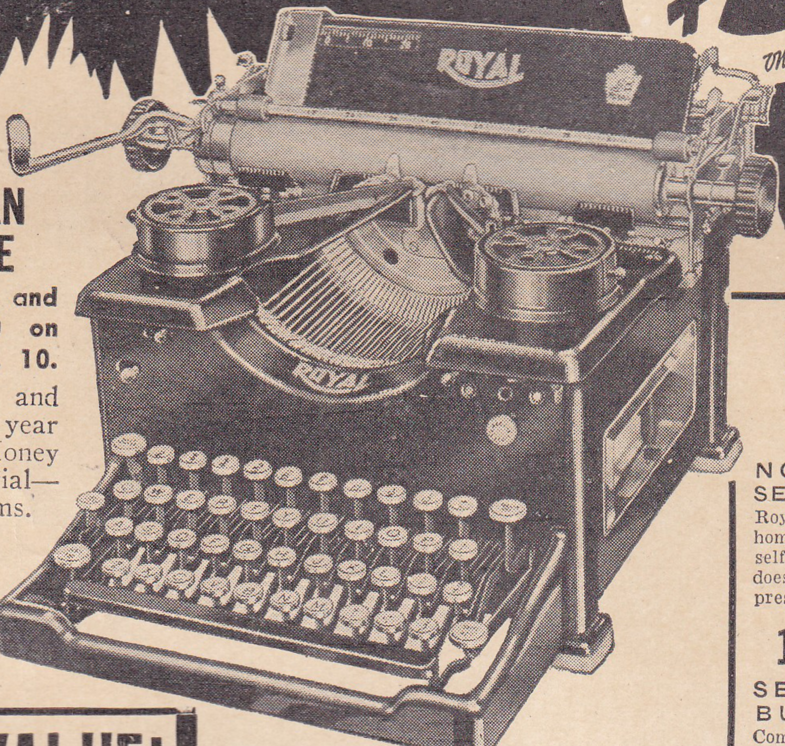

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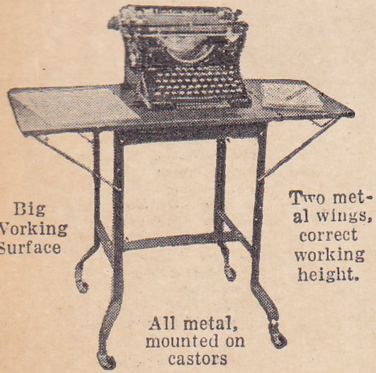
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WIZ—1

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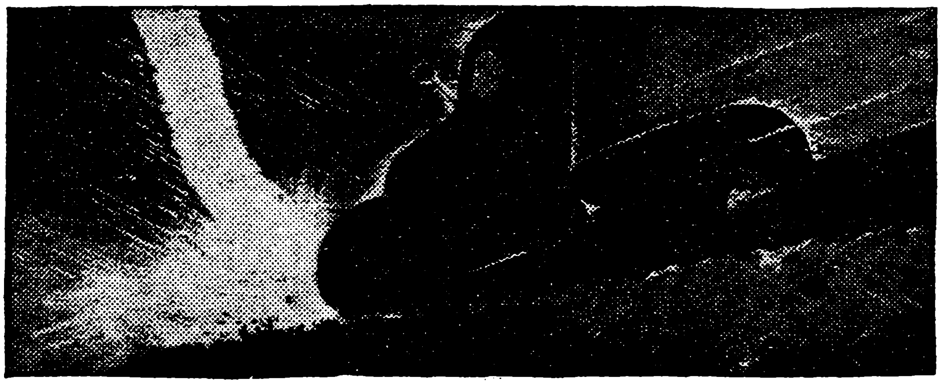
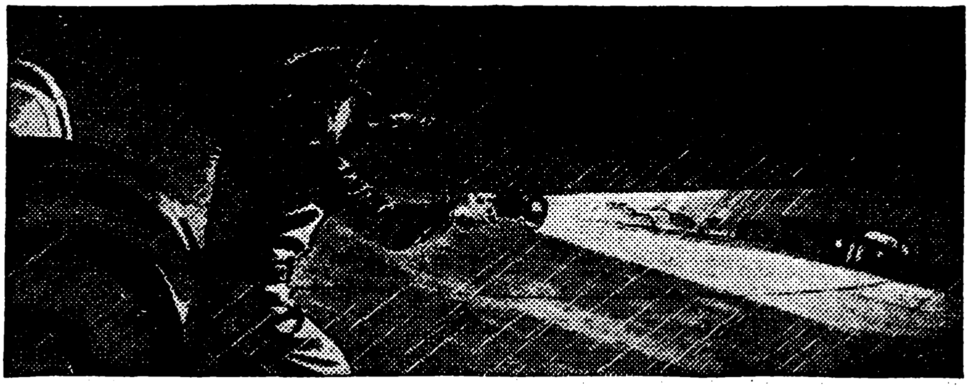
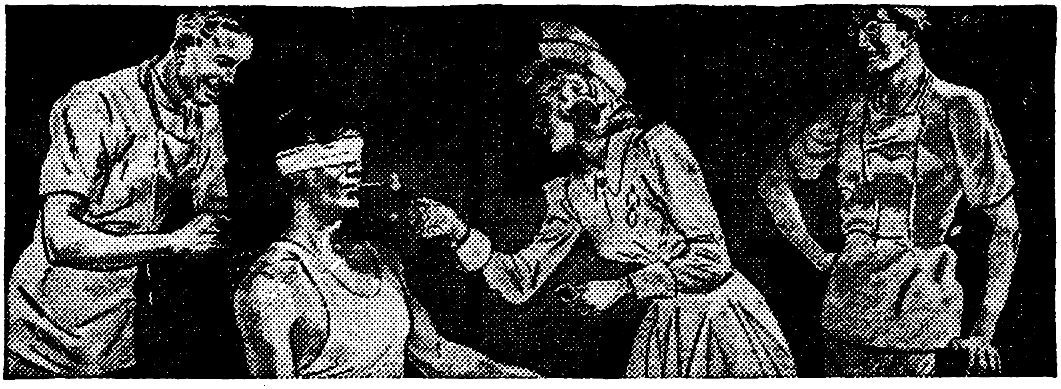


"THE RAIN WAS COMING DOWN in buckets as I took my heavy transport truck down a long hill," writes Mr. Fenimore. "Suddenly I thought the end of the world had come. Lightning had blasted the road a few feet ahead of my truck!

"THE BOLT BLINDED ME, but somehow I managed to bring that 10 ton truck to a stop. I groped in the darkness for my flashlight, then stood by the truck and flashed an appeal for help.





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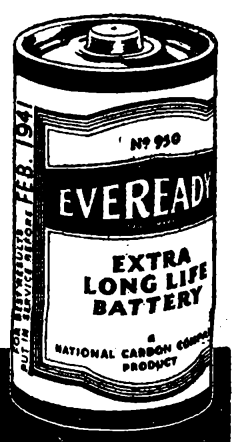
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The WIZARD

CONTENTS FEBRUARY, 1941 VOL. 1 NO. 3

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FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

LIQUID GOLD . . . . Phil R. Sheridan . . . 9

A live bomb in the shape of an ailing milk company is tossed into the lap of Cash Gorman. While the fuse sputters and burns, Cash and his assistant, Jimmy Ranger, struggle to remove the dynamite charge of sabotage and ruthless racketeering. The explosion becomes so imminent and dangerous that even Phineas Gardiner, bomb thrower in the first place, becomes hysterically fearful when his own skin is threatened. For once Cash's wits spell near-disaster to himself and a group of trusting confederates.

SHORT STORIES

DOUBLE SHUFFLE . . . . Jess Carver 87

Colonel Goobey marches in pomp on Cider Creek and marks Culpepper Twig as his special prey. Live and learn!

IN THE CHIPS . . . . Ross Russell 99

The plan seemed perfect as the launch approached the *Monte Carlo*, at anchor off the California coast.

DEPARTMENT

WITHOUT GUNS OR GADGETS 6

COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK

Without Guns or Gadgets

No weapons for Cash except his own wit.

SINCE the appearance of Thomas Jefferson Gorman, called Cash because of an ever-ready bundle which he is always eager to risk in order to get more of same, we have received many letters of commendation on the methods employed by Cash when the situation pinches. Typical is a letter from James Carter, of Washington, D. C. In part, says Mr. Carter: "Cash Gorman is swell, he's different from the supermen who are armed with all sorts of wonderful inventions to get them out of trouble. And Jimmy Ranger is swell as Gorman's assistant."

Another reader offers: "Cash is refreshing and a relief from the wonderful men between covers today." And still another: "The reason I like Cash Gorman is that he doesn't need a gun or a gadget to get out of trouble once he gets into it."

Well, folks, that's the idea. We have felt that Cash would appeal to you because of that one factor, if for no other. He's a fellow anxious and eager for adventure, and as you know, he gets plenty of it. But once he sticks his nose into the doorway of trouble there is no gas gun to get him out. He's on his own. His own impetuousness prevents him also from carrying just an ordinary weapon. He's always afraid he might use it. So in the most trying situations he's in there on his wits alone.

As you know, in previous episodes he's been in some tight situations and involved with some unscrupulous persons. Compared with the cast of characters in "Liquid Gold," however, Nick Lias & Co. were pikers. Here Cash runs into a cut-and-dried situation where a racket is feeding off the gullibility of the average farmer and milk distributor. Phineas T. Gardiner wishes a lemon on Cash and finds that the agile Gorman man is only too ready to squeeze it right into the Wall Streeter's own eye—which he does with great care before Phil R. Sheridan and "Liquid Gold" run the full course. Try it now, Page 9.

• • •

Culpepper Twig has become another favorite, we suppose, because everybody is inherently a lazy lout and would eagerly trade places with Cully, who manages to outwit his more intelligent fellowmen—and do it without torturing his finer senses with such unpleasant items as work, or even gainful occupation. In "Double Shuffle" (Page 87) poor old Cully is a set-up for the wiles of a collection of chiselers who aim a visit at the unsuspecting village of Cider Creek for the express purpose of becoming acquainted with Twig. Strictly speaking, Colonel Goobey is interested in Cully's bank roll, and making its acquaintance proves an interesting and profitable experience—for the Colonel and Cully!

HOW A FREE LESSON STARTED BILL ON THE WAY TO A GOOD RADIO JOB

I HAVEN'T HAD A RAISE IN YEARS -- GUESS I NEVER WILL -- I'M READY TO GIVE UP
BUCK UP, BILL, WHY NOT TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S GROWING -- WHERE THERE'S MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT -- I'M NOT GETTING ANYWHERE. I OUGHT TO TRY A NEW FIELD TO MAKE MORE MONEY
LOOK AT THIS - RADIO IS CERTAINLY GROWING FAST -- AND THE NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE SAYS THEY TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO RIGHT AT HOME IN SPARE TIME
I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON FREE. GUESS I'LL MAIL THE COUPON AND LOOK INTO THIS

Find out how Practical it is to
TRAIN AT HOME FOR GOOD RADIO JOBS
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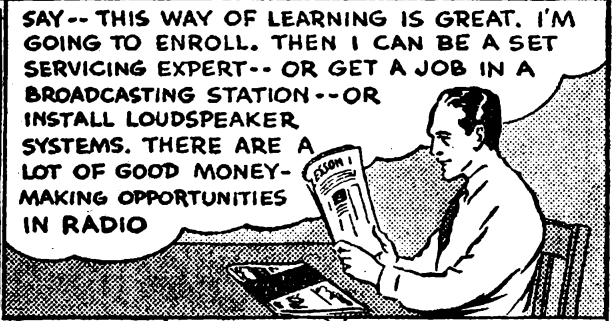
SAY -- THIS WAY OF LEARNING IS GREAT. I'M GOING TO ENROLL. THEN I CAN BE A SET SERVICING EXPERT -- OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION -- OR INSTALL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS. THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD MONEY-MAKING OPPORTUNITIES IN RADIO
LESSON I

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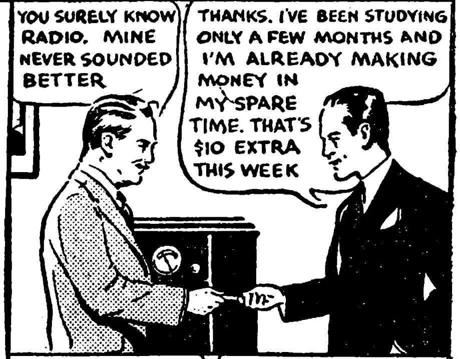
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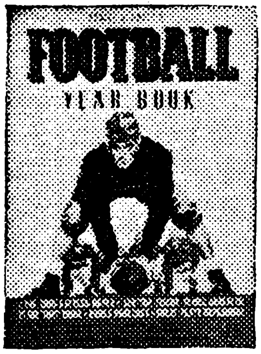

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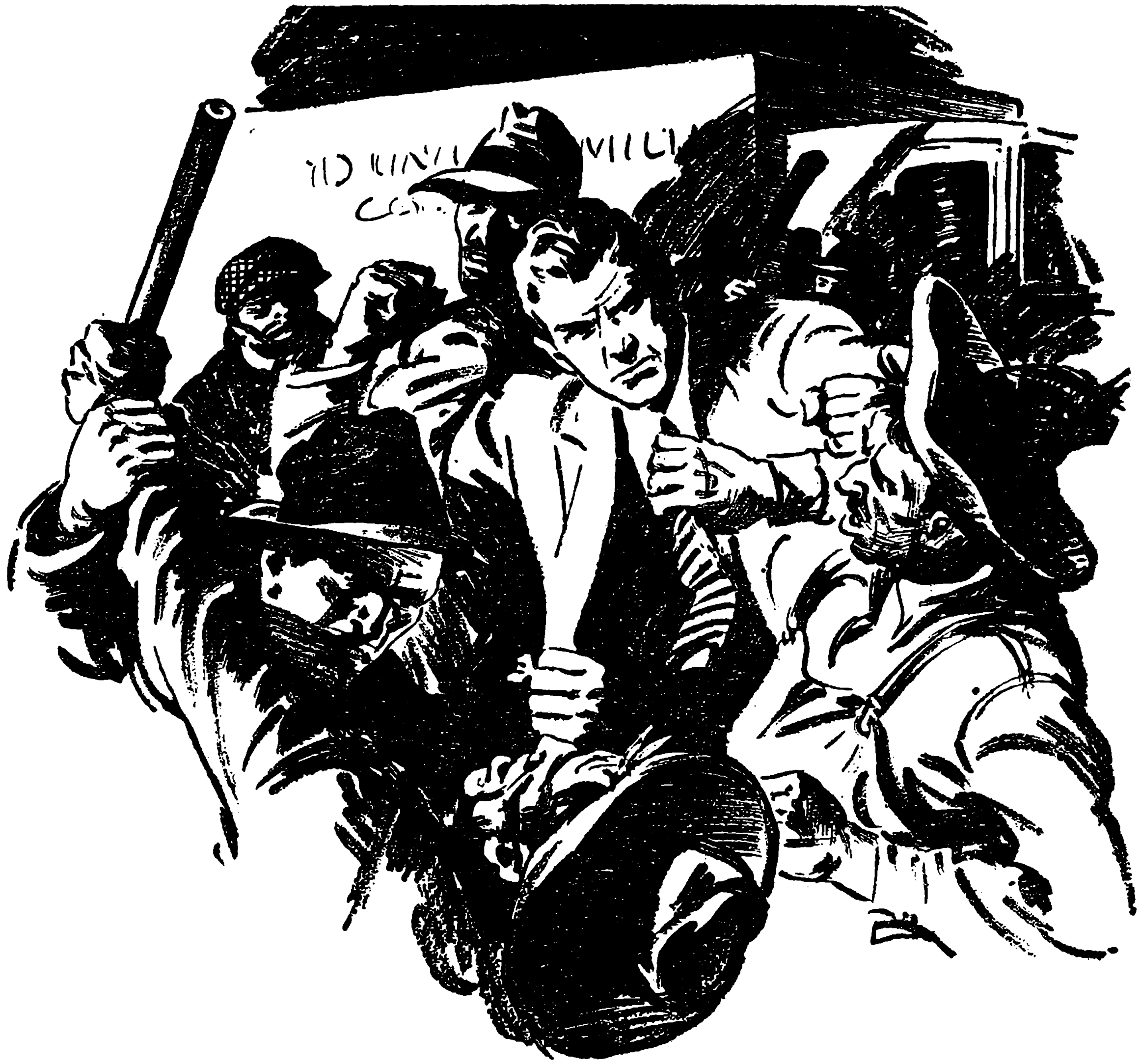


LIQUID GOLD

● Cash Gorman has a time bomb, in the substance of a milk company presidency, thrown in his lap. As Cash gradually uncovers the plot to sabotage the company, a nest of double-crossing and back-stabbing is laid bare which even frightens Phineas Gardiner, who lighted the fuse!

BY PHIL R. SHERIDAN

CHAPTER I.

YOU'RE PINCHED!

THE trim convertible which was speeding along the night-darkened Midwestern highway struck a road depression, jolting Thomas Jefferson Gorman awake.

"Where are we?" he asked his companion.

Jimmy Ranger answered without lifting his eyes from the flowing white ribbon of road: "The last road sign said, 'Marlborough—20 miles.'" He devoted himself to the road in silence for a moment and then rumbled: "That was a nice place we had dinner, Cash. Showers in every cottage; beautyrest mattresses, good coffee—"

"Stop! You're breaking my heart," Jeff told his assistant, associate, accountant and Man Thursday. Sternly, he added: "The flesh pots are not for us. Our duty lies in Marlborough."

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed wryly, "and our bank roll lies in Bolivia. First we get suckered into a tin mine without any tin and now it's a milk company—without any milk, I presume."

Jeff stretched his long legs and yawned. "How can you say such a thing?" he asked. In the reflected glow from the instrument panel his long, sun-darkened face took on an expression of pained surprise, but the little weather wrinkle around his alert black eyes crinkled with amusement. "No less a person than Mr. Phineas T. Gardiner, the menace of Wall Street, personally assured me that the place was overrun with contented cows."

Jimmy Ranger's expression was dour. The nonchalant attitude with which Gorman plunged into speculative ventures with the utmost cheerfulness annoyed him sometimes. Their bank roll had been reduced to $210.27 as the result of this new "investment" and Jimmy was not happy. "I think Gardiner hooked you," he said. "We'll probably find this Clover Valley Dairy Co. hanging over a cliff by his toenails. What do you know about the milk business, anyway?"

"Nothing," Jeff admitted cheerfully. "However, I understand it's absolutely indispensable to babies, and we'll probably learn more about it soon. Hey! *Look out!*"

A scene of incredible confusion jumped into the bright light of their road lamps as the car straightened out after taking a sharp curve. Stalled in the middle of the highway was a huge truck. Men armed with clubs were swarming over it. A second group of men was making for another truck which was attempting to back away from the scene. Ranger braked with his foot and simultaneously reached for the emergency as the second truck backed swiftly toward them. There was no clearance.

"Duck!" Jeff yelled the warning as the tortured rubber on their locked wheels shrieked against the concrete. The rear of the big truck loomed huge in their lights. Jimmy cut the ignition, and both of them ducked beneath the dashboard. There was a rending crash. Jeff was thrown heavily against the door and his head struck something metallic. He blanked out for a few seconds, and when he regained consciousness he felt a heavy weight on his back. Shaking his head groggily, he pushed upward.

Jimmy Ranger's voice growled a protest. "Wait a minute, Cash. That's me on top of you."

Jeff felt a warm, sticky fluid dripping down on his neck. Reaching up, he grasped Jimmy's arm. The coat was soggy. In quick alarm, he fished a jackknife from his pocket and started to cut away Jimmy's sleeve.

"Hey! What are you doin'?" Jimmy protested, jerking his arm away and climbing up on the seat to see what damage had been done.

"Your sleeve's soaked with blood," Jeff said.

"That's not blood," Jimmy replied

with resignation. "That's milk."

Jeff pushed himself upright from a sitting position on the floor of the convertible, but both he and Jimmy were sent sprawling again by a smashing blow to the car. A second crash followed, and a huge milk can bounced off the engine hood. The top flew off and they were deluged in a torrent of milk.

"Get that damned car out of the way," a savage voice ahead yelled at them. It was the driver of the truck which had smashed them. The milk was from big cans with which the vehicle was loaded.

"Dump it, boys," a heavy voice yelled. Five or six men swarmed over the big truck and began dumping milk. Cans from the truck ahead already were scattered all over the road, which ran white with milk.

"You didn't miss when you said we'd learn something about the milk business soon," Jimmy Ranger remarked dryly. "What kind of a mess is this, anyway?"

"Strike," Jeff snapped. "See if you can get the car started. We don't want any part of this."

A heavy-set man with a hard face jumped on the running board. "Don't touch that switch," he ordered.

"Why not?" Cash demanded, inspecting the face of the man on the running board speculatively.

"Because I said so," the man growled. He raised a threatening hand. There was a piece of pipe in it. The truck smashed the front of their car again and began shoving Jeff's car slowly backward. "That guy is locked in his cab and we can't get at him. Your car can hold him here until we get his milk dumped."

Jeff stared at the man angrily. "You don't care what you do to my car, do you?" he asked. He jerked to his feet, a triumphant smile flashing across his face. "Cops," he exclaimed. Raising his voice, he shouted: "Police! Help! Stick-up!"

The mob leader turned his head to shoot a glance over his shoulder. "Give it to him!" Cash yelled to Ranger. Jimmy raised a powerful fist and cracked the big farmer behind the ear, hurling him off the running board as Cash turned the ignition key.

"No you don't!" a second voice growled. Jeff was caught on the side of the jaw with a hard-driven blow, and a man leaned over his shoulder from the other side of the car, seizing the key. At his shout for aid, several other men climbed on the running board. In a moment, Cash and Jimmy were out on the road, the center of a swaying mass of men, possession of the key lost.

Jeff felt his arms pinioned behind his back. "O. K., Burk," shouted one of the men who was holding him. "We've got 'em!"

The burly, hard-faced man who had first jumped on the running board of their car pushed through the knot of men. In the reflected light of the unbroken headlight of his own car, Jeff saw narrow and shrewd steel-blue eyes and a thin, greedy mouth. Facing Jeff, he shouted angrily: "Stop being a sap and you won't get hurt." To one of the other farmers, he commanded: "Take the key and push this guy's car against the rear of that truck so it can't get away."

"We've got all the milk dumped, George," the man protested. "We'd better let this bird go."

Burk flushed angrily. "Get that car going like I told you," he yelled. "We're going to teach these scab truck drivers not to monkey around here."

In the distance a siren sounded.

"The sheriff's coming," several voices shouted.

Burk grinned. "O. K., give the guy his keys," he said. The first of the trucks the strikers had attacked was apparently out of commission, but the second smashed backward again into Jeff's car and the light machine rolled off the shoulder of the road. The sound of glass and metal smashing against big rocks reached them, and there followed a quick succession of smaller crashes as the car continued to roll. Jeff and Jimmy Ranger exchanged quick, startled glances, and both felt a cold chill run down their spines. The north side of the road flanked a deep gully.

"Stick around, mister. You've got some talking to do," Jeff yelled, grabbing Burk's arm as his own were released. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Little Red Riding Hood," Burk laughed, jerking free. "Come on, boys, let's get out of here."

THERE was a rush for a small, dirt side road behind them where the farmers apparently had their own automobiles parked. Jeff reached out with his foot and hooked Burk's ankle. The man sprawled flat on his face, and Ranger pounced on his back. Several of the farmers came running back, prepared for battle.

"I wouldn't," Jeff said grimly. He dropped a menacing hand into his pocket and shoved a small flashlight against the lining. It looked like a gun muzzle. "You men are responsible for wrecking my car," he snapped. "You can stick around and help your boss talk if you want to, but he's not leaving."

"The hell with Burk," one of the farmers said, retreating. "I told him it was dangerous to pull this job by that curve." Several other men joined him, but a small group remained.

"We're sorry about your car, mister," one of them said, "but the insurance companies have plenty of dough, and they can take the rap for that, and this is serious business with us." He edged forward.

"One more step and I'll let you have it," Jeff said. The man hesitated and then fell back as the sheriff's car, approaching from Marlborough, swung around a curve to the westward with siren shrieking and blinded their eyes with the glare of its road lamps. The car skidded to a halt by the first truck and five armed men tumbled out.

"All right, stick 'em up, everybody," the leader shouted. He was wearing a deputy sheriff's badge.

"Let him up, Jimmy," Jeff told Ranger. Burk climbed to his feet, his face contorted with rage. "Hello, Logan," he said to the deputy. Pointing at Jeff, he growled: "Grab that guy; he's got a gun."

The deputy signaled one of his men, who ran his hands over Jeff and then drew out the flashlight, grinning.

Jeff winked at the deputy. "A slight mistake in identity," he said. "I never carry a gun. Might go off."

"What's all this all about, Burk?" Logan asked. The deputy didn't seem much surprised at the milk cans strewn about the highway. Down the road, several cars started. Lights went on and automobile after automobile pulled out of the side road and fled down the highway.

"There go the rest of this man's strikers," Jeff said, nodding at Burk.

"I'll take care of my business," Logan said. The deputy made no move to send any of his officers to apprehend the fleeing farmers. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gorman," Jeff said. He

produced his driver's license.

"Thomas Jefferson Gorman," the deputy read. He looked at Jeff in quick interest. "Say, you're the new president of the Clover Valley Dairy, ain't you?"

Jeff nodded.

"You didn't lose no time, did ya," Burk yelled. "Trying to run outside milk in here and break the strike, huh?"

There was an angry murmur from the small group of farmers who had returned to the scene to help Burk.

"Looks like you've got some explaining to do, Mr. Gorman," the deputy said.

Jeff stared at him: "I have some explaining to do?" he asked. "How about these men? All I know about this is that I have a wrecked automobile on my hands." He explained the accident and what had followed.

The deputy turned to Burk: "How about it?" he asked.

"Who is this man?" Jeff asked, pointing at Burk. "I'm going to prefer assault charges against him."

"You aren't going to prefer anything," Logan replied. "We're in charge of this investigation, Mr. Gorman. What happened, Burk?"

The heavy-set farm strike leader looked angrily at Jeff. "Don't try to pretend you don't know who I am," he shouted. "I'm George Burk, the secretary of the Marlborough Dairy Farmers' Co-operative Association." He turned to the officer, snarling. "This man, Gorman, tried to bribe me to get the farmers to call off their strike. When I said I wouldn't have anything to do with him, he threatened to bring milk in anyway, so we threw some picket lines around the city. When this first truck come along, we stopped it and told the drivers about the strike. They said they had orders to deliver this milk to the Clover Valley Dairy and told us to either get out of the road or take the consequences. They started off and then they had a little bad luck, didn't they, boys?"

Some of the farmers laughed grimly.

"What kind of bad luck?" Deputy Sheriff Logan asked.

"They got a flat tire," Burk grinned. "Then they jumped out of the car and started after us with lead pipes and wrenches and we dumped their milk. That was when the second truck came along. He was trying to get away when this bird, Gorman, drives up and deliberately runs his car into the rear of the truck, yelling: 'You go on through. I'm paying you to get that milk to Marlborough, and I'm not letting you back up!'"

The deputy's jaw shot forward aggressively. "You can't get away with that strong-arm stuff around here, Mr. Gorman," he snapped. "Come along with us."

"There's no truth whatever in these assertions," Jeff replied. "I left New York yesterday morning, and I've been on the road ever since. I never spoke with this man, Burk, on the telephone, and I never heard of the Marlborough Dairy Farmers' Co-operative Association before. I didn't even know there was a strike going on here."

Several of the farmers laughed, and the deputy sheriff lifted his voice. "You got those drivers, boys?"

"Coming," a voice said, and two of the deputies pushed six truck drivers into the circle of light made by the lamps of the stalled trucks. They were tough-looking customers.

"Who hired you to run this milk in here?" Logan asked after inspecting them closely. "You aren't local men."

The truck drivers looked around uncertainly, their eyes resting on Burk.

"Come on," the secretary of the Farmers' Co-operative yelled. He pointed at Jeff. "We know that man hired you. And you better talk or you'll be in plenty of trouble."

One of the deputies jabbed a driver in the ribs significantly. "Spit it out, fella."

The driver pointed at Jeff. "That's the guy—Mr. Gorman," he said sullenly.

JEFF'S black eyes narrowed and his face became hard and threatening. "You make that statement under oath and I'll see that you're prosecuted for perjury and conspiracy," he said, his voice grim. "Who really hired you for this job—Burk?"

The secretary of the farmers' cooperative shook his fist at Jeff. "Don't try to pull no fast ones around here, Gorman," he cried. "This is an honest, law-abiding country, and we don't put up with that kind of stuff."

The farmers' group assented angrily, and several of the deputies looked at Jeff with ill-concealed anger. Burk spoke again to the truck drivers. "We know you're just tools, but we'll make it plenty hot for you unless you come clean." He pointed at Jeff again. "When did this man hire you?"

Logan, the deputy sheriff, looked at Burk in some irritation. "I'm running this, George," he said shortly. To the truck drivers he said: "How about it—do all of you identify this man as the one who hired you?"

They all looked at Jeff and nodded silently. "Yeah, that's him," one said finally when the officers pressed him for information. "He hired us last week in New York—said if there was a strike we was to pick this milk up at Leeds and drive it through to the Clover Valley Dairy."

"They're all lying," Jeff said coldly. "However, I suggest that any further remarks be made under oath." Jimmy Ranger started to speak, but Cash silenced his freckle-faced companion. Jimmy was seeing red. Jeff was, too, but he knew that argument was useless at the present time. They didn't know what was behind this.

"Just a minute," said Deputy Sheriff Logan. To the truck driver who had vouchsafed the information he asked. "What instructions did you have? I mean, in case any effort was made to stop you."

Burk spoke up excitedly: "We flagged them down and told them we were having a strike here. Told 'em this was a milk picket line and asked 'em not to pass through it. They jumped out of the truck and started beating us up. Naturally, the boys defended themselves.

Jeff looked at the scattered milk cans. "They sure did."

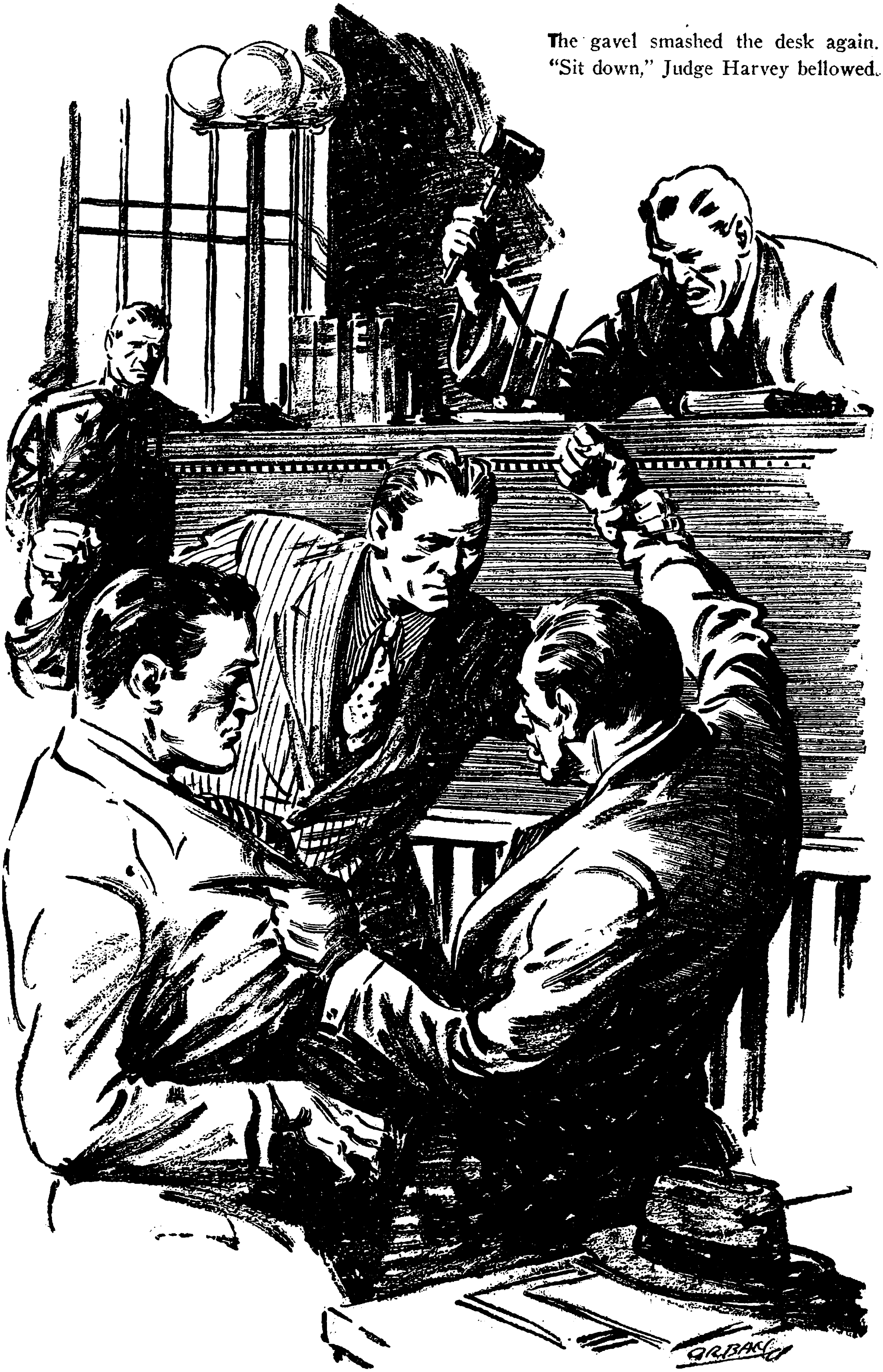
Logan looked at the talkative trucker. "How about it?"

The man nodded. "What do I get out of this if I talk?" he asked.

"We don't want to prosecute them," Burk said, looking around at his farmer friends. "Do we, boys?" They looked doubtful and he said: "We want to get the man behind them." He jerked his head at Jeff and Jimmy. The farmers growled quick assents.

"It ain't what you get out of it if you do talk," one of the deputies said, doubling up his fist and rubbing it pointedly. "It's what you get if you don't."

"Go ahead and tell 'em, Joe," one of the other drivers said.



The gavel smashed the desk again. "Sit down," Judge Harvey bellowed.

Joe scowled at Jeff. "You sure did get us in a mess," he growled. To the officers he said: "Sure, he told us if anybody stopped us we was to jump out of the truck and start beating the hell out of them. 'Teach 'em a lesson,' he said. Told us that we didn't have to worry about the law—he'd take care of that."

The chief deputy seized Jeff by the arm. "Oh, he did, huh?" he asked, his heavy red face flushing. "All right, Mr. Gorman, we'll see about that. You come along with us."

He started pushing Jeff toward the police prowl car, commanding two of his deputies to ride in with the truck drivers in their cabins.

Jimmy Ranger was not to be controlled any longer. "How about our car?" he demanded. "First these birds plant a trap for us and wreck our car. Then you help 'em frame us, and you're even going to leave our car out here to have the parts picked off it by anyone who happens along."

"Shut up, you," one of the deputies said angrily. Logan was angered, but ordered one of his men to stay with the car. "I'll send a wrecker out for it," he said. To Burk he added: "I'll release you in your own custody. Appear in my office tomorrow at nine o'clock."

Burk nodded. To Jeff he said: "You'll find you can't treat poor men like dogs around here, Gorman," he said. "You and your Wall Street friends aren't going to intimidate us with your strong-arm stuff. We've got laws out here and men to enforce 'em. And us Marlborough farmers stand up for our rights."

Jeff startled them all by throwing back his head and laughing. "That's your understatement for the week, Mr. Burk," he remarked.

Jimmy Ranger looked at him sourly as they were settled in the rear seat of the county officers' car. "I fail to see anything screamingly funny about going to jail."

Jeff sank back in his seat. "Buck up, Jimmy," he said. "There no use crying over spilled milk."

"That was closer to murder than spilled milk, Cash," Jimmy said. "If I'd taken a chance on the shoulder of that road, we'd have both wound up in the bottom of that gully with broken necks!"

CHAPTER II.

NO HELP FOR CASH.

THE creak of the cell door awakened Jeff, who opened one eye cautiously and beheld the turnkey standing beside him.

"Telegram for you, Mr. Gorman," the older man said. He grinned. "Hope you had a nice rest."

"I'll recommend your jail to all my friends," Jeff assured him. "What else you got there?"

"Brought you a couple of containers of coffee and the morning newspapers," his jailer said.

At the mention of coffee, Jimmy Ranger sat up abruptly in his cell bunk and sniffed appreciatively. "I'm glad there's one white man in Marlborough, anyway," he remarked. Jeff showed his appreciation by rewarding the turnkey with a five-dollar bill.

"We now have a bank roll of $205.27," Jimmy said disapprovingly. "A buck would have been enough, Cash. We aren't loaded with the stuff, remember?" He stared at the yellow sheet in Jeff's hand as Jeff suddenly began to roar with laughter. "What's up?"

"An epistle from Mr. Phineas T. Gardiner," Jeff said. "Get a load of this: 'Highly disapprove executives my corporations landing in jail Stop Please report immediately reasons for your disgraceful conduct and avoid criminal tendencies hereafter.' "

Jimmy Ranger, who, when seated, looked twice as impressive physically as he did standing, due to the fact that he ran to a thick chest, long arms and heavy shoulders superimposed upon a pair of short, partially bowed legs, swelled his chest and spread his arms with the righteous indignation of a fullback who has been kicked in the teeth. "I'd like to have that pious old hypocrite here," he said. "Why, the—" He paused suddenly, asking in naïve surprise which was emphasized by the splay of freckles across his open, boyish face: "Say, how did that old goat know that we were in jail, Cash?"

"He probably read it in the newspapers," Jeff said. "Presidents of milk corporations can't go running around inciting riots in secrecy in a democratic nation."

Jimmy's blue eyes opened even wider. "You think it was in the New York papers?" he asked. "They wouldn't be interested in something that happened out here."

"You forget that we have attained to some fame as the result of our little deal at Coral Island racetrack," Jeff remarked. "Putting Nick Lias and his labor racketeers in the hoosegow was not unmentioned, what with murder and such rampant on a field of double crosses."

Jimmy looked at him morosely. "Fame! You mean notoriety. Gosh, I hope this wasn't printed in the Colorado papers. I won't be able to go home."

Jeff inspected the bars of their cell and rattled them. "Not for a while, anyway," he remarked. "What does the local press have to say about us?"

Jimmy opened the two papers the old turnkey had brought them, revealing two huge pictures of Cash on page one.

"Well, they know who we are, anyway," Jeff commented. "As my old friend Mr. Achilles Democras Kokinatos, the wrestling promoter, has so aptly put it: 'Better a press that is smelling than no press at all.' I see even Phineas gets a going over in a light-hearted way. To read this, one would think of him as a bloated capitalist intent upon looting the country."

Jimmy snorted. "Why should he loot the country when he can take you over for a hundred thousand dollars in two hours. I told you he was handing you a hot potato."

Jeff sighed. "Look, Jimmy," he said patiently. "We got back from our little South American junket broke. We tried to borrow money all over town on that Brazilian land which may some day, we hope, be a rubber plantation—"

Jimmy interrupted his employer to remark respectfully that the Brazilian rubber land would make a nice nest egg for their great-grandchildren "If Gardiner doesn't have that, too, before we're through."

"O. K.," Jeff said. "But old Phineas was the only man who would lend us any money against it."

"Nuts," Jimmy remarked. "You can't call it lending us money. All he did was take it out of his left pocket and put it in his right."

Jeff had to admit the truth of this remark, as Gardiner, a cantankerous old financier to whom he turned only when all other sources of cash failed him, had made him the loan only on condition that Jeff pay him, immediately, the sum of the loan for twenty-five percent of the voting preferred stock of the Clover Valley Dairy Co., Inc. The Wall Streeter had retained twenty-six percent himself and told Jeff: "O. K., now if you want to make a bank roll, go out and put that outfit on its feet. I had to pick it up in order to get something else I wanted from a holding company that was on the verge of falling apart, but I have it on good authority that it's potentially a very profitable company."

JEFF had accepted the challenge, property unseen. As a matter of fact, he had very little choice. His bank roll, on returning from another unprofitable flier in South American mining, had stood at $900, of which he owed almost half to Jimmy in back salary. Not that this worried either of them very much, although it worried Jeff even less than it did Jimmy, who had never been able to accustom himself completely to the rapid fluctuations in their fortunes.

Phineas Gardiner had enjoyed the situation thoroughly, as the relations between Cash and himself were those of grudging, mutual admiration and, when they met on the common grounds of speculation, armed neutrality. They made use of each other when, as and if they could, and preferably to the financial detriment of the party of the second part.

"This paper sure did you proud," Jimmy Ranger remarked, looking up from his perusal of the *Marlborough Leader*. "They even have an editorial about you—stirring up class strike, labor warfare, and introducing the strong-arm methods of Eastern gangsters to the peaceful plains of the Midwest. Your 'career' is also treated with, and if I can believe what I read, you are a kind of cross between a racetrack tout and Captain Kidd."

"The *Morning News* is kinder," Jeff said, looking up from his own paper, "but that fellow last night—George Burk, the president of the Marlborough Dairy Farmer's Association—and Tom Logan, the deputy sheriff, didn't overlook anything in their comments about our depraved characters. People will probably think we're the type to go around stealing the milk right out of the babies' mouths instead of seeing to it that they are well fed with the precious stuff."

"What is the Dairy Farmers' Cooperative Association, if I may ask?" Jimmy inquired. "A fancy name for a sales co-op?"

"Uh-huh," Jeff said, continuing his reading of the paper. "They have a president, but apparently Burk runs the outfit. All the farmers who supply this milk-shed area belong to it. Ah! It seems we are also responsible for the strike. At least, the Clover Valley Dairy is responsible. That means us. I don't quite understand this, but it's clear that we're a couple of heels of the first water."

The turnkey appeared before their cell door again. "There's a lady out here to see you," he reported. "You're supposed to be held incommunicado, but I can't see that it will do any harm for her to come in and talk. Anyway, the sheriff ain't come down yet this morning, and the deputies are all over getting coffee, and my son works for the Clover Valley Dairy."

"A very sensible attitude, pop," Jeff said. "Your son can expect a quick promotion."

"You don't look like criminals to me," the old man said, winking. "Anyway, I don't like that George Burk. Think he's a crook myself."

Cash was all attention. "How's that?" he asked. He didn't place too much reliance on gossip, but it showed the way the wind blew.

"He's mighty high-handed with the other members of the association," the old man said. "And seems to me he gets along pretty well even for a prosperous dairy farmer—lots of trips to Chicago, and last summer him and his wife went touring all over. Folks ain't been making that kind of money recently. And he's always got a few dollars to lend if a man needs it, but he sure don't let 'em forget it. Course, he gets along awful good with the big milk companies. Gets almost anything he wants out of 'em. Guess that don't hurt the farmers too much, but seems to me he gets along almost too good."

"You have a dairy farm?" Jeff asked.

"Nope, my brother has," the old man replied. "Guess maybe I'm talkin' too much. And that young lady is waiting."

He started to move off. "What makes you think Burk gets along too well with the big milk companies?" Jeff called.

"Well, now, maybe I'm just harboring an unworthy suspicion, but the boys threw him out of the secretaryship once and they had so much trouble over prices and surplus milk and inspections and what not that they had to put him back in to straighten things out," their jailer explained. "Almost looked like that trouble was manufactured."

He started to move off again, and this time it was Jimmy who halted him, calling: "Who's the dame?"

The old man frowned at him disapprovingly. "She's no dame," he said. "This is a young lady—Miss Greta Wagner." He looked slightly surprised at himself. "Oh, yes, that's what I wanted to ask you. Do you want to see her?"

"Certainly," Cash replied. "Who is she, pop?"

"I already told you—" pop began. "Oh, I see what you mean. Why, her daddy started the Clover Valley Milk Co. Made a lot of money out of it, too. Then he had some trouble and lost control of it, and things have been going from bad to worse. He's dead now, but she's still got some stock in the company, I guess. Not much, though, and it ain't worth nothin'. She's a stenographer fer somebody." Pop winked laboriously at Jeff. "She's a pip."

"Another damsel in distress," Jimmy grunted. "We never miss them. Don't stick your neck out any farther than your shoulder blades, Galahad."

Jeff shook his head. "You ought to treat me with more respect, Jimmy," he remarked. "After all, I am your employer, and we are now executives. We should be dignified."

"If you get around to paying me my salary some day soon I'll run along in front of you unrolling red carpets for you to walk on and saying 'Yes, sir,' in a loud voice," Jimmy remarked. "By the way, did you hear what pop said about that Clover Valley stock. He said it's worth nothing."

"I trust he was exaggerating," Jeff replied. There was no levity in his tone as he added: "Twenty-five percent of nothing is nothing, and I'd hate to think of paying $100,000 for it, even if that Brazil property isn't worth the $100,000 we borrowed on it from Phineas."

"Looks like you've been swapping dead horses," Jimmy remarked. "But this one seems deader."

"The financial statements he showed me certainly wouldn't lead to any such conclusion," Jeff remonstrated. He didn't like to think of having been a sucker, even if he was clutching at straws when he went to see Gardiner.

"Probably something his auditor dreamed up just for you," Jimmy remarked cheerfully. "You notice he insisted on you giving him a 'Yes' or 'No' before you left his office."

Jeff waved a careless hand. "I have him then—misrepresentation. The SEC would land on him with both feet if he didn't make good."

"He didn't publish that statement in a newspaper," Jimmy pointed out. "He just showed it to you, and his word's no worse than yours."

"Thanks for them kind woids." Cash grinned. "However, I still have the statements."

"No," Jimmy said. "Not if this is as bad as it seems to be, you haven't. The statements you have are the ones his secretary handed you when he left the office."

Jeff stared at his assistant. "You don't think that old stinker would do tha—" He broke off suddenly. "Say! Do you think he has anything to do with what has happened here?"

Ranger shrugged his shoulders.

"He's pretty much on the level in dealing with the public, but he figures you for just another wolf and able to take care of yourself. It's hard to tell what he's up to."

Jimmy raised his eyebrows innocently, adding: "Of course, he may feel that with your unlimited experience as a milk authority you are just the man to put this undernourished baby back on the bottle standard. On the other hand, maybe he knows more about that property in Brazil than you do. Maybe he wants it. He can afford a long-term show like that, and if you don't put this dairy outfit over, you are not only still broke, but you've lost the rubber land."

"It's a lovely thought," Jeff said, eying his assistant sarcastically. As French heels clicked in the corridor, he held up a restraining hand, remarking: "Here comes the lady."

Jimmy grinned. "A more pleasant topic, I presume, Mr. Galahad."

Irritably, Jeff turned on his assistant: "Can that Galahad stuff. What do I pay you for—insults?"

"No," said Jimmy, happy at having goaded Jeff out of the cheery good humor which he considered unwarranted under the circumstances, "that's the beautiful part of our business association—you don't pay me."

When pop had been referring to Miss Greta Wagner as a "pip," he had not been exaggerating. Miss Wagner left nothing to be desired. She had blue eyes, raven black hair, and one of those peaches-and-cream complexions that the advertising managers of soap companies dream about on pleasant summer evenings. The advertising managers for hosiery companies would also find in Miss Wagner the stuff of which dreams are made. In general, she was the sort of a girl who caused traffic accidents simply by walking down the street. She had on something arresting in red which matched her lip rouge, and it was apparent that she was not accustomed to calling on jailbirds.

"Mr. Gorman?" She looked at Jeff intently, without smiling. Her blue eyes were cold. She seemed overwrought.

"At your service," Jeff remarked. He waved a hand around the cell. His quick smile flashed white in his dark features. He seemed to be laughing at his own position as he added: "Sorry I can't invite you in, but you know how house rules are—"

Her face paled. She stepped to the bars. From her purse she took a short-barreled .22 target pistol, training it on Jeff's heart with a hand that quivered only slightly as she said: "If you remain in Marlborough, Mr. Gorman, I will kill you." Her voice was quiet, and she spaced the words out as though she had rehearsed them.

They stared at her in mute astonishment.

Without speaking another word, she turned and disappeared down the cell corridor.

CHAPTER III.

A FRIEND AT COURT.

CASH looked at Deputy Sheriff Tom Logan dryly as he and Ranger were escorted into the courtroom over which presided Judge J. W. Harvey, of circuit court.

"A very neat piece of work, Logan," he remarked. "May I ask why the Clover Valley Dairy's lawyer was not to see me before this arraignment?"

Logan shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Haven't you heard?" he asked sarcastically. "You was being held incommunicado."

"The status doesn't apply to visits by my attorney," Jeff said. He raised his voice, addressing the judge, who was consulting with a bailiff concerning another case on the docket. "Judge Harvey, I would like to request your attention for a moment."

The judge lifted a close-cropped head of graying red hair, staring at Jeff in annoyance. "Your case will come before me in due time, Mr. Gorman; there is no favoritism in this court."

With considerable effort, Jeff kept his voice at a respectful pitch. "I beg your pardon, your honor," Jeff said, the white lights of news photographers' flash bulbs playing across his face. "When a prisoner is arraigned without opportunity to consult an attorney, it would appear to me to be an invasion of constitutional rights."

"What?" The judge's voice cracked like a whip. He glowered at the county attorney. "Will you explain, Mr. Britt?"

Mr. Britt, a longish man in horn-rimmed spectacles, looked vaguely surprised. "I know nothing of it, your honor. The details of the case were presented to my office only this morning. I naturally felt that—"

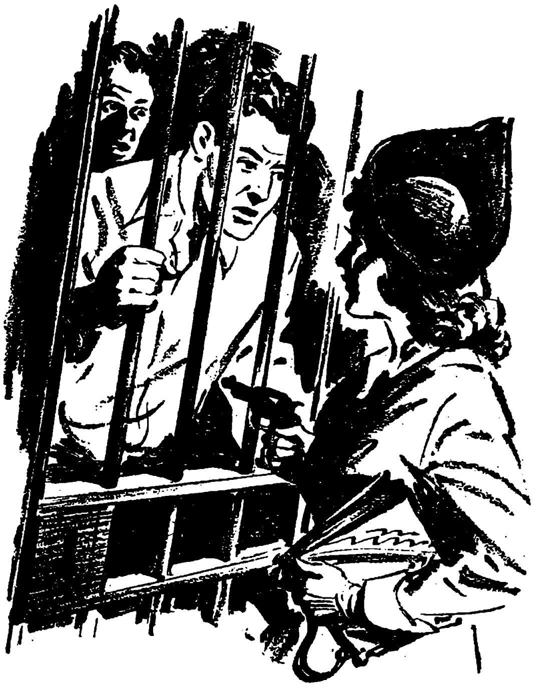
Judge Harvey put on his own spectacles and stared at the county prosecutor contemptuously. "I'm not interested in what you felt, Mr. Britt. Where is the sheriff?"

Logan stepped forward. "Out of the city, your honor. I led the squad who grabbed these prisoners while they were leading the riot."

Jeff leaped forward and cried: "I object to the deputy sheriff's language, your honor. This arraignment has not yet been called before the bench, but there are reporters present."

"Quite right," Judge Harvey thundered, his face almost as red as his hair. "You'll confine your remarks to answering my questions without embellishments, deputy." The judged turned his icy blue eyes on the reporters. "You understand, gentlemen, that the deputy's remark was not privileged?" He turned back to Logan. "Why has Mr. Gorman had no opportunity to consult an attorney, deputy?"

Logan's heavy face folded into a smile. "He asked to consult Mr. George



She trained the pistol on Jeff's heart. Her hand quivered only slightly as she spoke.

Holbridge, attorney for the Clover Valley Dairy Co., Inc., your honor, and Mr. Holbridge was not at home. I left word with the deputy on duty to reach Mr. Holbridge, but couldn't get him." Logan shrugged his shoulders again. "We haven't any instructions to cover such cases."

Judge Harvey surveyed Logan thoughtfully. "It would seem to me, Logan, that there has been undue haste in pressing this charge before the defense had an opportunity to prepare itself. I therefore put this case over until Thursday next, at the same hour. In the event that your attorney or one of your own selection is not available, the court will be pleased to assign one to you."

Jeff bowed. "Thank you, your honor. If you don't mind, I would prefer that the hearing be held this morning. With the court's permission, I will act on my own behalf." He glanced at the reporters. "So many strange things have happened to my associate, Mr. Ranger, and myself since we arrived at the outskirts of Marlborough last night that I was anxious to assure myself of the disinterest of the court." He looked sharply at Logan. "Not all the agencies connected with law enforcement have been equally disinterested."

There was a scramble of reporters for the door, and the judge pounded his desk with his gavel, shouting irately: "Mr. Gorman, you *also* refrain from addressing the press!"

Logan sprang forward and grasped Jeff by the coat lapel: "What d'ya mean by that crack?" he demanded, his thick face flushed.

Jimmy Ranger, all his bottled-up rage popping the cork, jumped to the peace officer's side and grasped Logan's free arm. "What do you think we are—dopes?" he demanded, raising his own fist threateningly. "We know we're being framed, and we know who's doing it."

Photo bulbs stabbed the dark court chambers with bright flashes, and two other deputies jumped up from the bench upon which they had seated themselves, grasping Jimmy and Cash. Judge Harvey's gavel smashed the desk. "Sit down," he bellowed apoplectically. "Sit down—all of you! You, there—the photographer! Sit down or I'll clear this courtroom!"

A keen-faced young man with wide-set blue eyes leaned over the bench in back of Jeff and spoke in his ears. "I'm Bill Kirk, of the *Morning News,* Cash," he whispered. "You fellows really figure you're being framed?"

Jeff grinned. "Stick around and see for yourself," he said. "Is there *really* a sheriff in this county?"

Kirk laughed. "Yeah, but he and Tom Logan don't get together. Lou

Rider is the sheriff, and Tom wants his job, but bad!"

"What about this fellow, George Burk, of the Farmers' Co-operative?" Jeff asked. "And what is the Farmers' Co-operative?"

"You mean the Dairy Farmers' Co-operative Association," Kirk corrected him. "It's just an association for collective bargaining over prices, surplus, delivery, general regulations, and such. There's a State law which authorizes associations of farmers in the various milk sheds to deal collectively with associations of milk dealers. That is, the companies. Say, don't you know anything about the milk business?"

Jeff shook his head blithely. "Not a thing, but I'm learning."

Kirk looked at him shrewdly. "Hasn't anybody from the milk dealers' outfit been in touch with you?" he asked. "As president of Clover Valley, you're a member of the dealer's association, you know."

Jeff grinned. "Thanks for the information."

"How about your own company?" Kirk asked. "Hasn't Hanson been in touch with you?"

Jeff shrugged. "Possibly he has been trying to get in touch with me."

Kirk chuckled. "He's not trying very hard, then," he said. "That's him in the back row. The thin fellow with the stoop shoulders and the yellow complexion."

JEFF recognized the name of the manager of the Clover Valley Dairy Co., and turned to inspect his new subordinate, reflecting that it was very peculiar that Hanson should have made no effort to contact the company lawyer and, if he did, to get another one when he learned Holbridge was out of town. Hanson avoided his gaze.

"Do you know the score in this game?" Jeff asked the reporter. Kirk started to say something, and Logan leaned over. "Shut up, you," he snapped. "This prisoner is being held incommunicado. Another crack out of you and I'll throw you out of this court."

Kirk sneered at the deputy. "Go peddle your fish, Logan."

Judge Harvey's gavel bent a board on his desk. "What's all that whispering about," he demanded.

"Logan said he was going to throw me out of *his* court, your honor," Kirk replied sweetly.

The judge's face grew beet-red. "Deputy, if you continue to disturb *my* court, I'll have you removed until I'm ready to hear this matter."

Jimmy Ranger covered a laugh with a bronchial attack. "We've got one friend, anyway," he whispered, referring to the bench.

"Two," Jeff replied, adding sotto voce over his shoulder. "Thanks, Kirk."

Kirk bent down behind the bench to conceal his disturbing presence from the judge's eagle eye and said: "You couldn't use a public-relations counsel, could you?"

"You're hired," Jeff said out of the corner of his mouth. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Turn around in your seat and have a look at the large, solid citizen with the expensive tailoring and the nice, well-barbered face coming down the aisle," Kirk said. "That's Malcolm Rigsley, the president of the Marlborough Milk Co., a subsidiary of Continental Dairy Corp. He's also the president of the Milk Dealers' Association, which represents all the milk companies in collective price agreements and market regulations. He just spoke to your nonco-operative manager, Hanson, in the back of the room, and his outfit owns fifteen percent of the preferred stock in your company. He is one of the boys who did not rush to your rescue last night."

Jeff nodded slowly. "Do you think you could find out if there might have been any connection between the absence of the Clover Valley attorney, Mr. Holbridge, and the conversation which Rigsley and Hanson just had?"

"Ah!" Mr. Kirk breathed softly. "Industrial espionage! What is the salary of the advertising and public-relations director at Clover Valley Dairy, Cash?"

"Twice the pay of a guy named Kirk at the *Marlborough News.*"

"Prosperity, your name is Gorman," murmured the youthful Mr. Kirk. "Would you be interested in knowing that we have not been without milk strikes in the past?"

Jeff nodded again, keeping a wary eye on Judge Harvey, who was busy disposing of some routine matters.

"There was a strike two years ago which was called by your old friend, Mr. George Burk," the reporter informed Cash. "It came about at a time when two independent milk dealers here were beginning to take away large numbers of customers from Marlborough Dairy and the other big nationally owned subsidiary, County Milk, Inc. There were several strange coincidences. The first was that Mr. Burk called the strike the day after Sheriff Lou Rider was taken with pneumonia."

Jeff turned on the bench and frowned. "What was so strange about that?"

"Lou is a very good friend of the farmers," Kirk said. "Offhand, if I were a farmer and wanted to have a strike, I would much prefer having Lou around to having his chief deputy, your old friend, Tom Logan, acting as sheriff."

"What happened?" Jeff asked.

"Why, Logan furnished escorts to bring milk across the State line," Kirk explained. "His patrol met the trucks at the border, but little of the milk got through the farmers' picket lines safely unless it belonged to the two nationally owned companies and the locals which see eye to eye with Malcolm Rigsley on everything. The two companies which had been taking business away from Rigsley and his friends finally went under."

"And?" Jeff asked.

"A man after my own heart," said Kirk. "Ask and you shall be answered. It was probably only a coincidence, but Burk spent the Winter in Florida and Logan built himself a $10,000 house. I am reliably informed that he paid cash on the barrel head.

Cash clucked a scandalized tongue. "To think that these should be the first gentlemen I meet in Marlborough," he said. "Tell me, do you think there is anything personal in this animosity they seem to have toward me?"

"Not at all," Kirk replied. "I imagine you're just in the way."

"Way of what?" Jeff inquired.

"Well, I'm not much of a milkman myself, and I don't know about such things," Kirk replied, "but I'd hazard a guess that you might be in the way of a lot of people making a lot of money out of the prospective bankruptcy of the Clover Valley Dairy, which is scheduled to take place, I understand, on the first of the month. That's a week from tomorrow and the eighth day of my own forthcoming vacation from the *News.*"

CHAPTER IV.

ROUND ONE: DRAW.

CASH attentively inspected the people in the courtroom; most of them men and, apparently, farmers. They eyed him with hostility.

"Recognize any of these spectators from last night?" he asked Jimmy Ranger hopefully.

"No, but here comes your friend, Burk," his assistant replied as the burly, narrow-eyed leader of the striking farmers entered the courtroom and made his way to the side of Chief Deputy Logan, whom he engaged in an animated whispered conversation. Almost simultaneously, the six men who had manned the milk trucks were brought in by two county officers.

Kirk reappeared and tapped Jeff's shoulder. "Britt, the prosecutor, has made a deal with those truckers. They're going to turn State's evidence and testify against you."

Jeff laughed. "Justice moves in peculiar circles hereabouts. However, we expected that." He surveyed the deputy sheriffs present and asked: "Those four deputies on that bench over there were all with Logan last night, Kirk. Are any of them on bad terms with him?"

"None of the deputies are exactly in love with him," Kirk replied, "but that big blond guy on the end of the bench doesn't like him from nothing. He's George Wolff, the sheriff's son-in-law."

"Good," Jeff said. "Find out anything about Hanson?"

"Yeah," Kirk whispered. "He's got you a lawyer—Rigsley's lawyer!"

"What?" Jeff twisted about on the bench on which he and Jimmy were seated. The deputy seated on the far side of Ranger said nothing, but Logan immediately moved to their side. "You can't talk to the prisoners, Kirk. Scram!"

"Why don't you go lay an egg, Logan," Kirk asked. "You aren't impressing anyone around here. We know you."

Judge Harvey rapped on his desk with the gavel. "I want order in this courtroom," he bellowed. "Mr. Logan, please seat yourself."

"Your honor, I was just asking the prisoners not to talk with newspapermen," Logan protested, a subservient whine in his voice. "My orders are—"

"Be seated, deputy," the judge growled. "Mr. Kirk, you and the other gentlemen of the press will please refrain from any further conversation.

Jeff arose quickly. "Prior to my arraignment, your honor, I would like to have permission to consult with Mr. Larry Hanson, general manager of the Clover Valley Dairy Co., who is present in court."

Judge Harvey questioned: "In connection with the charges against you?"

"Yes, your honor," Jeff replied. "I have yet to meet any officers of my company, and in view of my ignorance of the local milk situation affecting my company and myself, I feel this consultation will be of value to me in refuting the charges which have been brought against me."

"I have no objection if the prosecution has none," said the judge.

Mr. Britt looked uncertainly from George Burk to Logan.

"Come, come, man," Judge Harvey snapped irritably. "Do you have any objections or don't you, and if so, on what grounds?"

Logan and Burk scowled at Mr. Britt, who desperately ransacked his mind for reasonable grounds that would not make him look silly in print.

"Very well," Judge Harvey said, accepting Britt's silence for consent. "Go ahead, Mr. Gorman. You may make use of my chamber if you wish. Bailiff!"

Hanson, looking somewhat bewildered, hurried forward to accompany Jeff and Jimmy Ranger to Judge Harvey's chamber. Seen close up, the general manager of the Clover Valley Dairy appeared even more round shouldered and saffron-complexioned than when Jeff had first observed him. He was an intelligent-looking man with a high forehead and receding hairline. Jeff judged him to be about forty-five, and conceded that although Hanson might know the milk business inside out, he certainly didn't have the appearance of an aggressive executive or a man of action. At the moment he looked harried and pale, probably from worry and lack of sleep.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Gorman," he said nervously as the bailiff closed the door behind them. "I regret all this more than I can say. If there is anything I can do—" His voice trailed off weakly. He extended his hand in greeting.

Jeff ignored it. "Why didn't you get a lawyer to me last night, Hanson?" His voice was brusque, his mouth a hard line as his sharp, black eyes probed the man before him.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Gorman. I did my best, but our attorney, Mr. Holbridge, was out of town," he stammered. "However, I have just arranged to have you represented by an excellent lawyer—"

"So have I," Jeff cut him off irritably. "Why didn't you get hold of Holbridge and have him send someone to see me last night?"

Hanson told him Holbridge was at a fishing camp and couldn't be reached. Something in his attitude aroused Jeff's suspicions.

"At whose camp?" he demanded sharply.

"I really don't know. Some place up in the Green Lakes," Hanson replied.

"You're a poor liar, Hanson," Jeff snapped. "If you didn't know where he was, how did you know he couldn't be reached?"

Hanson got a grip on himself. Throwing back his shoulders, he replied with as much forcefulness as he could muster: "I resent your attitude, Mr. Gorman. I realize that you are the president of the company and that you have had a very trying experience, but I, too, am an executive of the company, and an old and trusted one—"

Jeff contemptuously waved him into silence. "You *were* an employee of the company, Hanson," he snapped. "You're fired."

Hanson broke down. "You don't mean that, Mr. Gorman," he gasped. "You can't. I'm not responsible for the poor financial condition of the dairy. We operate more economically than any dairy in town. Please, let me show you our cost sheets—the plant economies I've affected through efficient working methods." His eyes pleaded for a reprieve, but Jeff turned carelessly away to speak to Jimmy Ranger. Hanson grasped his arm. "I've been with the dairy since it was built, Mr. Gorman. I'm not well off. My wife has been sick for years."

Jeff looked at him speculatively. "Where was Holbridge last night?"

Hanson sighed. "I should have told you immediately. I . . . I . . . uh . . . felt guilty about it for no reason.

I really haven't anything to do with this, but—"

"Get out of here," Jeff said. "I don't want any weasels working for me."

Hanson hesitated. "He was at Malcolm Rigsley's fishing camp. We went up there together yesterday morning, planning to stay for several days. I was called back to town on business and expected to return today—"

"What business?" Jeff continued mercilessly. "How could you be called back if there was no telephone? If you don't want to tell me, I'll find out, anyway. Something smells here. I'm sending for detectives. Before I get through here, there's going to be trouble. Is Holbridge one of Rigsley's pet, too?"

"No," Hanson blurted out, "that's why we had to—"

"I thought so," Jeff said contemptuously. "Get out!"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Gorman," Hanson pleaded. "I didn't want to have anything to do with this, but I can't afford to lose my job. If the company folds up, Rigsley is the man who will have the power to continue me in my position."

Jeff looked at him in astonishment. "If the company folds up, there isn't any more position," he said.

"You don't understand," said Hanson. Suddenly his attitude became truculent. "However, why should I tell you anything? You can't control your own board of directors! Rigsley will see that I'm reinstated."

Jeff looked at him shrewdly. He didn't want to lose Hanson. He had no doubt that the man was honest at heart. He had just been caught in a dirty mess. "Don't be too sure about that board of directors," he said. "After all, Gardiner and I between us own fifty-one percent of the stock, and I have his proxy. Now, do we play ball?"

Very quietly, Hanson said: "Clover Valley hasn't a chance to survive this mess unless you have fresh money to put into it. If you have that, I'll play ball."

"You don't have to worry about that," Jeff said confidently.

Jimmy, who had been a silent spectator until this moment, gave a lusty sigh as he sank deeper in his chair, his attitude saying as plainly as words: "Hold your hats, boys, here we go again."

JEFF concealed a smile with an effort. After all, he had not told Hanson that they would have fresh money; he had merely stated that new capital was no worry of Hanson's.

The door opened and the bailiff stuck his head in. "Judge Harvey will be ready in a few moments, Mr. Gorman."

"Thank you. We'll be right out," Jeff said. "I'll take care of your job, Hanson. The lawyer was got out of the way on purpose, wasn't he?"

Hanson nodded. "You see, Rigsley is chairman of your board of directors. As you must know, his Marlborough Milk Co. belongs to Continental Dairies, Inc., so that he has plenty of money behind him. And power! Marlborough Milk owns fifteen percent of our stock, but Rigsley wants the whole business, and he is anxious to discredit the company with the community. Because of various things, all that is needed is a final push to force us into receivership. His plan, I think, is to give us that final push so that he can pick up the stock for practically nothing and reorganize Clover Valley as a subsidiary of Marlborough Milk, allowing it to retain its present name and local identity."

Jeff was puzzled. "Why don't they just knock the company out in the field if they are so anxious to get rid of it? If Clover Valley is discredited with the public, that means that its business will be all shot. What good would it be then as a subsidiary?"

"Once the company is forced into receivership, a local movement will be started to refloat it," Hanson said. "You must understand that these big milk corporations which operate in many cities find it necessary to preserve a certain number of local independents and apparent independents so that they will not be open to charges of monopoly. On the other hand, they never like these independents to grow so large that they themselves cannot control local market conditions. County Milk and Marlborough Milk do that here through the local milk dealers' association, of which there are eleven members. We once had twenty-five companies here."

"I see," Jeff said. "And if the company were forced into a receivership, who would start this movement to refloat it? Burk and Logan?"

"I don't know for sure," Hanson said. "Probably Burk would head up the drive to save the company. That would give it a popular flavor, due to his position in the farmer's organization. Rigsley wouldn't appear in the movement, I don't believe, but he would furnish the money through dummies. Thus it would look as if the company had been rescued from outside interests whose mismanagement had hamstrung it."

"Ah," Jeff exclaimed, "that's where I come in!"

"Yes, that's right," Hanson told him. "They have been waiting for just such an opportunity. You see, the strike is general, affecting all the companies here. The milk dealers' association has a collective-bargaining agreement with the dairy farmers' association on prices and so forth. The dealers have a rule that a motion on policy must be carried by a two-thirds majority. When the association voted to meet the farmers' demands, Clover Valley, with the support of four small companies, voted 'No.' "

"Who represents Clover Valley in the association?" Jeff asked.

Hanson flushed. "I do. Rigsley told me to vote that way. You can understand he is in a position to apply pressure?"

Jeff nodded. "But he voted to meet the farmers' demands?"

"That's right. Possibly it's just a coincidence, but the farmers made their demands the day after your appointment as president was announced."

"I catch," Jeff said. "That makes me the villain. An unscrupulous outsider trying to introduce ruthless business methods and also a public-be-damned policy."

The bailiff stuck his head in the door again. "The judge is ready, Mr. Gorman."

They arose, and as they walked into the crowded courtroom, Jeff asked Hanson what Rigsley's attorney was going to do.

Hanson shook his head. "I don't know, but they were certainly anxious to get Holbridge out of the way—"

"Isn't there a telephone line out to this fishing camp?" Jeff asked.

Hanson turned brick-red. "There was," he said, "but it's out of order now."

CHAPTER V.

RIGSLEY OUT OF ORDER.

PRELIMINARIES to the arraignment were concluded when Max Freed, Rigsley's attorney, bustled into the courtroom with a great show of haste, consulted briefly with Rigsley, and then approached the bench. As Jeff expected, Freed, with the air of a man dashing to a last-minute rescue, obtained the recognition of Judge Harvey and requested a brief postponement, in order that he and Rigsley might have the opportunity of consulting with Jeff.

Judge Harvey made no effort to conceal his annoyance at this final irritation. "May I ask in what capacity you appear in this case, Mr. Freed?"

His tone was testy, but it was apparent from his attitude that he knew what was coming.

"Although Mr. Gorman is possibly unaware of the fact, I am attorney for the Marlborough Milk Dealers' Association, of which the Clover Valley Dairy is a member. It therefore may be said that I also represent the Clover Valley Dairy, and, inasmuch as the present action involves the defendants as a result of Mr. Gorman's position as the president of the Clover Valley Co., I have been requested by the Milk Dealers' Association to offer my services to Mr. Gorman. Permission is also sought for Mr. Malcolm Rigsley, president of the Marlborough Milk Dealers' Association, to confer with the defendants, as the association feels itself to be involved, however unwittingly, in the outcome of this hearing."

"I have no objections if the prosecutor has none," Judge Harvey said wearily. He directed his attention to Mr. Britt, who blinked uncertainly behind his spectacles again and finally indicated that he had no objections either.

Jeff stood up. "I object, your honor."

There was complete silence in the courtroom. Even Judge Harvey looked startled.

At the press table, someone remarked: "Looks like we're going to have fun on the milk front."

Jeff looked directly at Rigsley. "I appreciate the motives of Mr. Rigsley and his attorney, Mr. Freed," he said. He paused a moment and let his eyes turn on Burk. "In fact, I so fully appreciate their motives that I still prefer to represent myself!"

Rigsley thrust himself violently from his seat, his heavy-jowled face flushed brick-red. "Judge Harvey, I don't think this young man knows what I'm trying to do for him," he shouted. "As the president of the Marlborough Milk Co., I have long fought for better business ethics in our city, and I think we have attained them. I personally abhor Gorman's conduct in this affair—"

Judge Harvey rose to his feet and slammed the gavel on his desk. "Mr. Rigsley, you are out of order. Please be seated or I'll have to ask you to leave this courtroom! You are only a spectator here."

"I'm sorry, your honor," Rigsley said, but he remained on his feet. "I was merely trying to be helpful. As president of Marlborough Milk Dealers' Association, I came here this morning to furnish bail for Mr. Gorman and make available the advice of our counsel. After all, he's a fellow member of the association, and it is *possible* that he's an impetuous and misguided young man who doesn't appreciate the fact that strong-arm methods have no place in the milk busin—"

Bang went the gavel! At a nod from the judge, the bailiff started toward Rigsley. The milk-company executive quickly resumed his seat.

Jeff's voice cut through the silence. "Your honor," he said respectfully, "lest it be thought that I am unappreciative of Mr. Rigsley's offer of assistance, may I request the court to ascertain why it is that Mr. Rigsley has been unable to summon my own attorney from Mr. Rigsley's fishing camp?"

Rigsley shot to his feet again, but a look from the judge was sufficient to silence him. Freed, however, spoke up quickly, his face livid: "Your honor, aspersions have been made with regard to my professional reputation—"

Jeff broke in quickly, shouting: "Judge Harvey, I object to any further statements being permitted Mr. Freed or Mr. Rigsley. If they wish to construe my words as an accusation, I suggest that they institute a civil suit for slander."

The judge wielded his gavel again. "Sit down, Mr. Gorman," he snapped. "Mr. Freed, you will refrain from any further comments. It should be obvious to you that you are not further concerned in this case. I wish everyone present to understand that no further irregularities will be tolerated. Any comments except those directly bearing upon this hearing will be considered as contempt of court."

He glanced rapidly through the papers having to do with the charge and looked up again, addressing Jeff. "In view of the unusual circumstance, I will, if you so desire, direct the prosecuting attorney to permit your release under bail and postpone this hearing until a later date, Mr. Gorman."

"Thank you, your honor," Jeff said respectfully. "I am satisfied to continue."

The charge, inciting to riot with felonious intent, was read, and Jeff entered a plea of "not guilty," after which, in his dual position as defense attorney and defendant, he asked that the court dismiss the charge.

"On what grounds?" Judge Harvey asked.

"Insufficient evidence, your honor," Jeff said. "For one thing—"

Judge Harvey cut him off and directed Britt to produce testimony to substantiate the State's charges. Britt called first upon Deputy Tom Logan, who testified as to the circumstances surrounding the arrest, quoting the statement of Burk.

Burk was next called upon, and he testified that the strikers, under his direction, were peacefully picketing the road when the two trucks in the case came along. They flagged the trucks down to inform their drivers that a strike was in progress. Without provocation on the part of the pickets, he said, the truckmen, on Gorman's orders, piled out of their trucks and started after the pickets with lead pipe and wrenches."

Jeff was immediately on his feet: "I object, your honor," he said. "I was not on the scene when the alleged attack was made and therefore could not have ordered the truckmen to make such an attack."

Britt answered quickly. "The witness did not contend that the order was given at the time of the attack, your honor. He said that the truck drivers were acting under Mr. Gorman's orders, which they admit to doing."

"Your honor, does Mr. Burk claim to have been a witness to the delivery of such orders?" Jeff demanded.

Judge Harvey repeated the question to Burk.

"No, I didn't hear him give no such order, but the truckmen admit—"

Judge Harvey interrupted him: "We are not concerned at present with what the truckmen admit," he snapped, adding to the court stenographer: "You will strike the testimony given by Mr. Burk concerning orders which allegedly had been given by Mr. Gorman from the record."

THE remainder of Burk's testimony was very cautious, and Jeff made no effort to conceal a smile of satisfaction. He made no reference to the struggle for the keys to Jeff's car, nor to the telephone threat he had allegedly received the previous night, but testified that Jeff, after arriving on the scene, had engaged in the melee.

"Do you wish to put any questions to the witness, Mr. Gorman?" the judge asked.

"If you please," Jeff said. "First, Mr. Burk, on what circumstances did I arrive upon the scene?"

"I didn't see your arrival," Burk said.

"When did you first see me?" Jeff asked.

"I saw your car jammed into the rear of the second truck."

"When Deputy Sheriff Logan arrived, you told him that I drove my car deliberately into the truck, did you not?"

"Sure. That's what you did."

Jeff laughed. "If you didn't see me arrive, how do you know that?"

Burk scowled heavily and Britt said: "Objection, your honor. The questions were so worded as to confuse the witness."

"Objection overruled," Judge Harvey snapped. "Answer the question, Mr. Burk."

"Well, it was dark and there was a lot of confusion out there," he said. "When I looked up, there was Gorman's car pushing against the rear of the truck."

"Do you imply that there was no possibility of our car rounding the curve in the road at that point and accidentally hitting the truck?" Jeff asked.

Burk looked at him contemptuously. "Anybody coming around there too fast to stop would have tried to miss that truck and gone off the road."

Jeff arched his eyebrows and, with a glance for the reporters, asked: "You admit then that you established a road picket at a position where any oncoming car might have plunged into a deep ravine, possibly with fatal results, had it sought to avoid the trucks you halted in the highway?"

The prosecutor objected vociferously.

"What is the purpose of this line of questioning," Judge Harvey asked.

"I wish to establish the fact that it was no accident that these trucks were halted in the highway at such a time and in such a manner that my car would be unable to pass them."

"Continue, Mr. Gorman."

Jeff spoke very slowly: "When we attempted to start our car, why did you jump on the running board with a lead pipe in your hand and demand that Mr. Ranger, who was driving, leave the car where it was or suffer the consequences?"

"I didn't!" Burk shouted. "I told him to back the car up or you both would get hurt in the riot."

Jeff shot out the next question: "Then why was Ranger smashed on the head with a club when we tried to back up? He might have been killed—"

"Nobody touched him!" Burk shouted angrily. "One of the boys just grabbed the ignition key. You know that—"

"I object to this line of questioning," Britt protested. "The witness is not on trial."

"Overruled," said the judge. He looked at Jeff with interest. "Proceed, Mr. Gorman."

Jeff smiled triumphantly at Burk. "You admit then that the only reason why we joined in the melee was to regain possession of the key to our car?"

"Sure," Burk blustered. "The boys recognized you when you knocked me off the running board. Your pictures were in all the papers the day before. When they seen it was you they knew what was up."

Jeff shrugged an eloquent shoulder at this tribute to the catlike eyesight of Burk's farm strikers. Leaning forward and speaking very distinctly, he asked: "Didn't you also tell the chief deputy when he arrived on the scene that I had driven my car into the truck because the truck was attempting to back away, and that I wished to prevent this, even shouting to the truck driver to get out and slug the pickets?"

Burk looked at Jeff nervously. All the deputies present had overheard this statement. "Sure," he said, "that's what happened."

"Have you ever tried to drive a car without an ignition key?" Jeff put his hands in his pockets and looked at Burk with wide-eyed interest.

"You're a wise guy, ain't you?" Burk exclaimed. "You smashed into that truck when you came around the curve."

Jeff looked at him in bewilderment. "But you didn't see me come around the curve. You said that yourself."

Jeff dropped his mocking attitude and turned to Judge Harvey with the utmost seriousness: "Your honor, I'm not acquainted with the legal procedure, but I would like to request that the court order the testimony of this witness to be purged from the record due to its contradictory nature."

"So ordered," the judge said. He favored Burk with a long, suspicious stare.

The next witnesses were the truckmen. One after another they repeated their allegations of the previous night: That Jeff had hired them in New York to run the milk through and beat up the strikers, "to teach them a lesson," even if the pickets were using peaceful methods.

"In other words, you were sent out here for the purpose of causing milk riots?" Britt asked of the last man whom he examined, the leader of the group, who gave his name as William Sword.

"That's right," Sword replied. "We wus told to bash 'em up every time we got a chance, and to make our own chances if they didn't make any trouble themselves."

"That's all, thank you," Britt said, glancing from Judge Harvey to Jeff and the reporters in satisfaction. The prosecutor's ailing ego had been revived.

"Do you wish to question the witness?" the judge asked Jeff, who had, to the astonishment of all present, refused to question any of the other truckmen.

"No questions, your honor."

The judge looked at him shrewdly, but Bill Kirk leaned forward anxiously and whispered from his seat in the press section: "What's the idea, fella, trying to prove yourself guilty?"

"Mr. Kirk, you may remove yourself from this court," said the judge. To Jeff he asked: "Do you wish to testify in your own behalf, Mr. Gorman?"

"Your honor, may I question one of the deputies who was present at the scene of the riot last night?"

There was a stir among the four deputy sheriffs, and Logan subjected them all to a grim stare. George Wolff, Sheriff Baker's son-in-law, looked thoughtfully at the ceiling.

The irrepressible Mr. Kirk paused attentively in the corridor outside the open courtroom door.

"You may call the deputy to the stand, Mr. Gorman," the judge said.

"Deputy Sheriff George Wolff, please take the stand," Jeff requested.

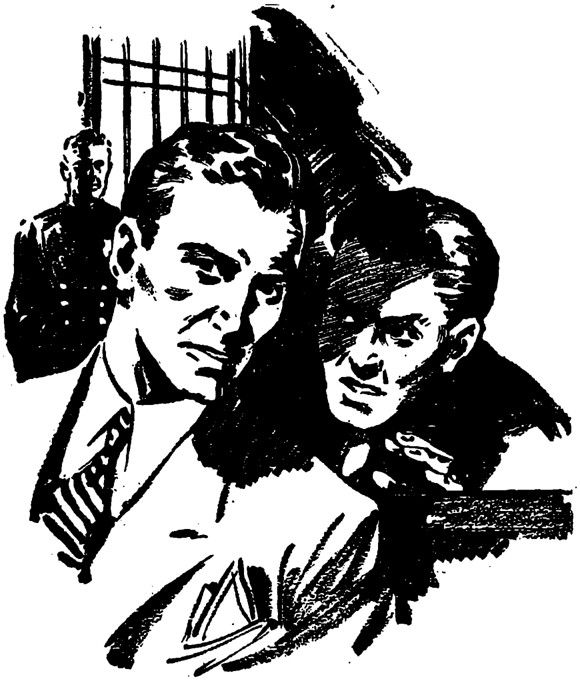
DEPUTY WOLFF took the stand with an expression of pleasurable anticipation.

After preliminary question establishing the fact that Wolff had been present at the time the truck drivers had said that Jeff was the man who had hired them to drive the milk through to the Clover Valley Dairy, Jeff said: "I would like you to give your closest attention to the next question, Mr. Wolff. When William Sword, the spokesman for the group, said that I hired him, do you recall where and when he said I contacted him?"

Wolff frowned thoughtfully for a moment, taking his time about the answer. Finally he spoke: "Yes, sir. He said you hired him last week in New York."

"That's all, thank you," Jeff said.

He turned to Judge Harvey, taking several papers from his pocket and offering them to the judge, saying: "Your honor, I wish to present as evidence my passport and two visas, together with three telegrams addressed to me respectively at Rio de Janeiro, La Paz, Bolivia, and aboard the Brazilian Clipper. I believe that you will find this evidence proves conclusively that I could not have been in New York prior to Monday morning of this week, as I left La Paz, Bolivia, only nine days ago. In the event that the court or the prosecuting attorney would like further evidence, I refer them to the United States Immigration officers at Dinner Key, Florida, my port of entry into the United States via Pan American."



Kirk bent down behind the bench to conceal himself from the judge's eyes.

The judge devoted his attention to the evidence submitted to him by Jeff. After a moment, he leaned forward on his elbows and stared grimly at the former witnesses for the State. "William Sword, take the stand again!"

Sword nervously walked forward.

"I wish to remind you that you are under oath," the judge said prior to asking: "When did this alleged transaction between Mr. Gorman and yourself take place, and where?"

Sword, his face a study in uncertain emotions, hesitated.

"Speak up, man," Judge Harvey rasped. "You don't forget an engagement of that nature."

Sword looked around helplessly and then said: "On Monday. It was on Monday, your honor."

"What time on Monday?"

"Oh, around lunchtime."

"Where?"

Sword's face brightened. "In the automat at Thirty-first Street and Broadway."

The intensity of the judge's gaze was flintlike. "You made a slight mistake, Mr. Sword. Mr. Gorman didn't say that he arrived in New York on Monday. He said he couldn't have arrived prior to Monday. Among the papers he gave me is a letter from the department of commerce, Washington, D. C., acknowledging a request for information which he made personally during a call at the department on Monday. The letter establishes the fact that he spent almost the entire day in the department of commerce."

Judge Harvey took a long breath and delivered himself of what the press termed one of the most scathing denunciations ever leveled against a local prosecuting attorney for bringing an action upon such flimsy evidence, denounced Deputy Sheriff Tom Logan, and bitterly assailed the witnesses for their trumped-up testimony and concluded: "Mr. Britt, I order you to hold the last six witnesses for the State on charges of perjury, without bail. As for you, Mr. Burk," he said, looking directly at the secretary of the Dairy Farmer's Co-operative, "I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt with regard to your confused testimony. However, I may say I've rarely ever seen a more confused witness."

The judge looked sternly at the prosecutor again. "Mr. Britt, I hardly think it necessary to tell you that I think your office would be lax if it does not find in this proceeding today ample grounds for an investigation of a possible conspiracy to defeat justice. Case dismissed."

Jeff cordially thanked Judge Harvey.

The judge removed his spectacles, making his observant blue eyes seem to grow larger. He replaced his glasses and looked at Jeff over their rims, running a hand through his gray-streaked red hair.

"Mr. Gorman," he said, smiling for the first time, "Portia was a piker. If you are ever desperate for a career, I might suggest the bar!"

Kirk grasped Jeff's arm as he turned away from the bench. "The boys want to talk to you."

In the corridor outside the courtroom, Jeff was surrounded by reporters.

"What's behind all this, Cash?" one of them asked. Questions flew at him.

"Just a minute," he smiled. "I'm not trying to give you a brush-off, but I really don't know. At present, I can only say one thing: Neither I nor the interests I represent had anything whatsoever to do with the riot last night, nor the alleged attempts to forcefully deliver milk to the city. I understand that the Clover Valley Dairy Co. is held responsible for the decision which resulted in the calling of the present strike, but I assure you that not only was I unaware of the fact that a strike was in progress until last night's misadventure while I was en route to Marlborough to take over my new duties, but I still am ignorant of the demands made by the Farmers Co-operative Association through Mr. Burk. Whatever action I will take with regard to the farmers' demands depends upon their nature, but I assure you that in so far as the Clover Valley Dairy Co. is concerned, we are anxious to bring about a peaceful difference in the interest of the public as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, Cash, that's O. K.," one of the reporters said, "but what did you mean when you said that you understood Rigsley's motives only too—"

Crash! They all turned toward the door of the courtroom.

"What happened?" a reporter hollered.

"Hanson jumped out of the window," somebody shouted.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW ALLY.

JEFF immersed himself luxuriantly in a tub of warm water and gave himself over to contemplation.

"Come on in the bathroom," he finally yelled to Jimmy Ranger. "Bring paper and pencil, we're going to have a conference."

"Conference, my eye," said Jimmy, "we ought to have our heads examined. When do you suppose that Wagner girl is going to pop up with her little shotgun?"

Jeff shrugged. "We ought to be safe in here," he grinned. "I'm more interested in Hanson just at the moment. You were still in the courtroom when he jumped, weren't you?"

Jimmy nodded. "I was talking to him while you were out there with the reporters. He was telling me he thought we'd have to have $100,000 to get the company on its feet. Seems he was treasurer as well as general manager, and said it was imperative that money be raised immediately. Suggested that you and Gardiner arrange a loan personally. He looked pretty worried, but I thought he was worrying about the company."

"Is that all he said?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah, that's about all. One thing he said I thought was sort of funny. He said 'Mr. Gorman strikes me as being a ruthless man.' I thought it would be a good idea to keep him in line, and I practically told him you had a heart of stone and a brain that functioned with all the endearing warmth of a machine."

"Thanks," Jeff said wryly. "I can always count on you, Jimmy. What did he do then? Just walk over and jump out the window?"

"No. He excused himself and I went over to Tom Logan to see about getting our money out of the sheriff's till. While I was talking to Logan I saw Malcolm Rigsley collar him."

The soap shot out of Jeff's hand. "Did you watch them?"

"As well as I could," Ranger said. "I don't trust anybody around here."

"And?"

"Rigsley seemed pretty sore. I guess he figured Hanson had talked pretty freely with us. Hanson seemed to be apologizing for something. Anyway, he was obviously on the defensive. Rigsley turned away from him abruptly and walked off. Hanson started after him and then he stopped. He looked kind of dejected, but I didn't pay any more attention to him. A guy as round shouldered as he was always looks unhappy. Next thing I knew he'd jumped out of the window."

"Poor son of a gun," Jeff said. "He got caught in the middle and couldn't take it. There's something very much the matter around here." He submerged to the chin and thoughtfully studied a soap bubble for a moment. "I think you'd better audit the books out at the plant personally."

Jimmy nodded. "You want me to go out there now and have a good look around?"

"No, see if you can locate Bill Kirk first. Tell him that when he starts to work for us tomorrow, his first job is to prepare a dosier on George Burk. I want to know all there is to know about him and his position in the Dairy Farmers' Co-operative organization. You can probably get him at his office on the telephone." Jeff frowned. "Didn't that nice old guy over at the jail who brought us the coffee and the newspapers this morning say his brother was a dairy farmer and his son-in-law worked out at our plant?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Call up and find out who his son-in-law is and get him down here. We'll do a little pulse feeling regarding the farmer-labor situation," Jeff sighed. "While you're doing that, I'll chew up a bar of soap."

Jimmy stared at him. "What was that last?"

"You heard me," Jeff replied. "I want to be in the proper nasty frame of mind to write a report to our beloved associate, Mr. Phineas T. Gardiner, the rat."

MR. PHINEAS T. GARDINER'S private secretary, a prematurely gray-haired young man who looked as if he had been run over every day for years by a steam roller, paused at the entrance to his employer's office and looked up its carpeted, cathedral-like distance to the huge desk behind which Phineas T. himself was engaged in reading—*Love Story.*

Phineas lifted his small, frosty blue eyes and glared at his secretary from beneath beetling brows which protruded like gray tufts growing out of a beefsteak. "Well, what do you want?" he bellowed. "Don't stand there gaping." Phineas put aside *Love Story.* "Come on, speak up, time is money."

"I have a telegram from Mr. Gorman, sir," said the sad young man.

"Well, bring it here," Phineas commanded. With a benign smile, he added: "Wants me to get him out of jail, I presume?"

"Not exactly, sir," said the secretary, extending the heavy message.

Gardiner glowered at him. "Young fool! Throws money around as though it grows on trees! How long is that telegram?"

"Two hundred and sixty-one words, Mr. Gardiner"—his secretary sighed with resignation, adding—"collect."

"What?" Phineas' complexion took on a bluish tint. *"Collect!* Don't accept it. Send it back."

"I'm sorry, sir, but the message has already been signed for."

"Well, tell Mr. Humphreys not to accept any more collect telegrams from Gorman. That's a standing order. Two hundred and sixty-one words! The man must be crazy!"

Already in a properly apoplectic mood, Gardiner devoted himself to the telegram. A series of grunts which his secretary interpreted as meaning "The man must think I own Western Union" marked Gardiner's progress through the message, which read:

DEAR SIR: YOURS OF EVEN DATE ADDRESSED TO ME AT MARLBOROUGH COUNTY JAIL RECEIVED AND CONTENTS NOTED. FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS MAY BE ADDRESSED TO ME AT THE GREEN PALACE HOTEL, MARLBOROUGH, OR TO MY OFFICE AT THE CLOVER VALLEY DAIRY CO., WHERE I WILL ASSUME MY DUTIES TOMORROW. A REGRETTABLE MISUNDERSTANDING MADE IT NECESSARY TO ACCEPT THE HOSPITALITY OF THE MARLBOROUGH COUNTY SHERIFF LAST NIGHT, BUT I AM PLEASED TO REPORT THAT THIS MATTER HAS BEEN RECTIFIED. SIX PERSONS WHO ATTEMPTED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MY INNOCENT AND TRUSTFUL DISPOSITION ARE NOW

THEMSELVES INCARCERATED. LET THIS BE A LESSON TO YOU.

I SINCERELY REGRET TO ADVISE YOU THAT I AM A SADDER BUT WISER MAN AS A RESULT OF YOUR SLEIGHT OF HAND WITH FINANCIAL STATEMENTS BUT IT GIVES ME MORE THAN PLEASURE TO INFORM YOU THAT THE CREDITORS MAY FORCE OUR COMPANY INTO RECEIVERSHIP AT ANY TIME, SAID PLEASURE DERIVING ONLY FROM THE FACT THAT YOU OWN MORE OF THIS DEAD HORSE THAN I DO. A MINIMUM SUM OF ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS TO SPARK LIFE INTO THE CORPSE AND PROTECT OUR MUTUAL INVESTMENT IS NECESSARY. I SUGGEST THAT YOU UNDERWRITE A SHORT TERM COMMERCIAL NOTE AT THE BEST TERMS AVAILABLE FOR THAT AMOUNT AS CREDIT IS OTHERWISE UNATTAINABLE. YOURS FOR PURE MILK.

THOMAS JEFFERSON GORMAN,
PRESIDENT, CLOVER VALLEY
DAIRY CO., INC.

"Humph! Got himself into a mess of trouble," Gardiner said with delight. "Take a telegram to Mr. Gorman. Collect!"

Phineas paused and sighed. "No, you better not send it collect; he wouldn't accept it. Postpaid—as follows:

'SITUATION YOUR HANDS. SINK OR SWIM. UNDERWRITING NO NOTES, MAKING NO LOANS TO CLOVER VALLEY CO. ALREADY HAD WRITTEN INVESTMENT OFF BOOKS WHEN OCCURRED TO ME TO SELL TO YOU. IF YOU ARE SUCCESSFUL REPRESENTS PURE PROFIT MY PART. IF NOT YOUR FAILURE PERMITS ME FORECLOSURE BRAZILIAN PROPERTY WHICH I ULTIMATELY WILL BE ABLE TO REALIZE UPON. YOU DIDN'T SEE THE RIGHT PEOPLE. DRINK LOTS OF MILK.'

"That's all. How many words is it?"

His secretary computed the wording: "Sixty-seven words, Mr. Gardiner."

"Send it air mail," Phineas said. "What's the quotation on International Nickel?"

HAPPILY unaware of the unsatisfactory response which soon would be winging its way toward him from Gardiner by air mail—cost, six cents—Jeff was still relaxing in the tub with the hot water running as he examined production charts sent him from the office of the Clover Valley Milk Co., when Jimmy Ranger reappeared, saying: "Matt Dugan's here—the son-in-law of the old boy at the jail."

"O. K.," said Jeff. "Show him in."

"Here?"

"Certainly," Jeff replied. "Nobody by the name of Dugan is going to object to a little informality."

Mr. Dugan filled the doorway with his presence, grinning. "Hiya, Mr. Gorman," he said. "Glad to meet you. Just been reading in the papers about how you made a sap out of the cluck, Burk. That did me good."

Mr. Dugan, who ran to six feet and two, with black hair and blue Irish eyes, held up his hands suggestively and said: "I'd like to get his neck right there."

"I'll remember that," said Jeff, turning off the hot water. "I don't usually receive visitors in the tub, but I can think better here, and after a night in the cooler I feel like a good soaking is indicated. Your father-in-law was telling me about you. What's your job up at the plant?"

"I'm superintendent of delivery," Matt replied. "I have charge of the routes—home delivery and stores."

Jeff looked him over and liked what

he saw. Dugan was big, tough and honest.

"You brought up on a farm?"

Dugan nodded. "My old man had a dairy farm."

"Then you know the score, don't you?" Jeff asked.

"Sure, I do." Dugan frowned. "Pop told me—that is, my father-in-law, Mr. Erickson, down at the jail—that he figured you for a square-shooter. If you are, mister, you come to a place where they need one; but people are suspicious about your dough coming from Wall Street—particularly farmers."

Jeff laughed. "You want to know how I got into this, Matt?" he asked. Dugan nodded, grinning. Jeff told him.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Dugan. "You're just shooting craps, aren't you?"

"Well, maybe, but I've got to pull this company out or I'm flat broke. Are you with me or are you against me?"

Dugan clasped his hands, fighter fashion, and shook them. "I'm with you. But there's going to be a hell of a fight!"

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Promote one of your boys to your job. You've got a new one. You're contact man between the dairy and the farmers. And just to let 'em know that when they talk with you they're talking to the right man, you're the new manager. Now how about this strike?"

Dugan looked slightly amazed, and then his chest expanded about two inches. "Thanks, Mr. Gorman," he said, adding modestly, "I should have had that job a long time ago."

He frowned again. "You want it straight, so here it is. The farmers are getting gypped. They're getting two dollars and fifty cents a hundred pounds for fluid milk, but feed is high and they have to pay their own trucking expenses in this market. Trucking is badly organized. They have to pay from twenty-three to forty cents to get their milk to market."

Jeff nodded. "I get it. What do the farmers think of the dealers' association?"

"Lots of 'em don't like it," Matt replied. "Like my uncle, Jim Dugan. He deals with Marlborough, but he don't think he's getting a square shake on surplus, but he can't change. It's one of the rules."

"How does your uncle feel about Burk?"

Matt glowered. "He feels the same way I do. He figures Burk is running the farmers' association to suit the dealers. Lots of men feel that way, but Burk can get things fixed up for 'em if they get into trouble, and if they get *too* critical, they always begin having trouble with the companies that he don't fix up until they come around and get friendly again."

Jeff carved a statue out of a piece of soap and then asked: "What price do they want for their milk?"

"They asked for two dollars and sixty cents for fluid, but they'll take less," Matt replied. "Feed prices are due to drop in a couple of months."

"What's our spread on fluid milk?"

Matt grinned: "Very nice; runs around three cents a quart."

Jeff stared at him. "Why aren't we making money?"

"Well, I've only been manager for a few minutes, and I haven't seen the books. I'm talking about operating and overhead, but not our fixed charges. They're pretty heavy."

"If they're heavy enough to eat up a three-cent spread, we might as well throw the place away," Jeff commented.

"Well, I'm not going to worry about that right now. What's our big distribution problem?"

"Getting rid of surplus," Matt said. "We haven't got any city contracts for hospitals, relief, baby milk stations, institutions—things like that. Under local agreement, due to the fact those places get a special price, that milk sells at a price based on the manufacturing price."

"Who has that business?"

"Rigsley and Marlborough Milk, County Milk and Lee at Great Meadow have most of it. They scatter some around to the pint-sized outfits, but we haven't any."

"Why not?"

Matt shrugged. "If Hanson was here you could ask him. I don't know."

"Who is Lee?"

MATT'S eyes opened wide. "Boy, you really walked in here with your eyes closed. Lee owns Great Meadow, the biggest independent. He rates next to the two nationally owned companies: Marlborough and County Milk. We're fourth. Also, Lee is our biggest bondholder. In fact, he represents the bondholders' protective committee. And he's on our board."

Jeff closed his eyes. "This becomes more painful all the time. Is he friend or enemy?"

Matt answered soberly: "He'd like to close us up, buy our plant and satisfy himself and the rest of the bondholders and creditors from the proceeds; paying, of course, just enough to pay himself back for his investment in our bonds, which he picked up cheap."

"Why doesn't he?" Jeff asked.

"Well, you see, he doesn't want to run the place as a subsidiary. As the biggest local milkman, he figures to pick up most of our trade if we go under. But he's afraid to push us for fear that Rigsley would pull a fast one and get the plant and operate it as a subsidiary. Anyway, that's what I hear."

"Whoo!" Jeff exploded. "Well, that's a break, anyway—the boys are blocking each other. Well, I can see it isn't going to do any good worrying about such small matters as that. Is this strike doing us much harm?"

"Plenty. If it kept up for three weeks, we'd never have a chance," Matt said.

"O. K.," said Jeff. "Get on your horse and ride out through the countryside. Tell the farmers we deal with that we'll pay 'em two dollars and fifty-five cents if they'll play ball with us when and if feed prices are substantially reduced."

"But the Milk Dealers' Association," Matt protested. "You've got to fall in with what they say."

"To hell with the Milk Dealers' Association," Jeff replied. "We have to sell milk. They say our vote caused the strike. O. K. I'm going to tell them we've changed our minds. We want to make peace. If they were on the level, then they'll vote the other way. If not, we act alone."

"But the Farmers' Co-operative Association wouldn't let the farmers sell to a single dairy," Matt said.

Jeff cocked a quizzical eye at Dugan. "Listen, Dugan, you're the general manager of Clover Valley now. You say we can make money paying two dollars and fifty-five cents—that is, we can make an operating profit. You leave the rest of the worries to me and I won't bother you. There's a job to be done. If necessary, it means busting up that farmers' association. But I want milk. If you can't get it, I'll find somebody who can."

Dugan scowled belligerently. "I can get it."

"Atta boy," Jeff said. "I've got one suggestion to make. Try to get as many farmers as possible in bunched areas so they can protect themselves if Burk tries any rough stuff. And keep your nose clean legally. If Burk gets really tough, we'll bring in some 'farmhands' from Chicago who won't know a cow from a mowing machine, but they'll be mighty handy to have around. Smear mud on Burk every chance you get. I'll send you a transcript of his testimony at that hearing today that ought to be helpful. And we've got a press agent named Bill Kirk whenever you want to get any juicy items printed about our side in this fight. On your horse, fella."

Dugan rolled his shoulders happily. "I think I'm going to enjoy working with you," he said as he left. Pausing, he added: "Say, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Shoot," Jeff said.

"Are you going to stay in that tub all night?"

Jeff laughed. "Nope. I'm climbing out right now," he said, suiting the action to the word as his new general manager disappeared. Considering the circumstances, there was no good excuse for it, but Jeff burst into hearty song. Jimmy Ranger interrupted him, squeezing through the door and yelling: "That dame is here!"

Jeff stared at Jimmy in amazement. His assistant looked like a man who has seen the No. 1 figure in a lobster-à-la-Newburg nightmare suddenly materialize in the flesh. "What dame?"

"That woman. The one who's going to shoot you! Greta Wagner!" Jimmy locked the bathroom door behind him.

"Here?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah—right out in the room," Jimmy said.

"Has she got her popgun with her?"

"How do I know?" Jimmy asked. "I guess so. She looks awful mad."

Jeff looked at him in disgust. "Well, put her out!"

"I should go pushing homicidal nuts around," Jimmy protested.

"She don't want to shoot you—she wants to shoot me," Jeff said, pushing Jimmy toward the bathroom door. "It's up to you to get rid of her. You let her in."

"I couldn't help it," Jimmy said. "She knocked on the door just when Dugan was starting out, and she walked right in."

"Well, you just go on out there and keep her amused, pal," Jeff said. "I'm not going out and get shot."

"Me neither," said Jimmy. "Shall I call the police?"

"Hell, no," Jeff said. "I've been reading those reports the office sent down and I find she's on our board of directors. We can't go around having directors arrested."

Jimmy scowled. "Let's just let her sit there until she gets tired, Cash."

"Nuts to that," Jeff replied. "You go on out and keep her company. Hold her hand and tell her what a fine guy I am. I don't want her shooting the lock off that door."

Reluctantly, Jimmy unbolted the door and squeezed back into the room as Jeff stood behind the portal, well out of range.

Jimmy knocked. "It's me," he said. "Open up."

Cautiously, Jeff opened the door an inch without sticking his head around.

"She says she won't leave without talking to you."

"O. K.," Jeff said, stepping back into the tub and raising his voice so it could be heard without difficulty in the other room. "I'm going to sit right in this tub until she gets out of here. No lady would ever shoot a gentleman in the tub!"

CHAPTER VII.

GLASS IN YOUR HAIR.

JIMMY RANGER'S voice broke through Jeff's slumber.

"Telephone," he said, shaking Jeff's shoulder. "It's Matt Dugan."

Jeff squinted at the clock. "Good night!" he complained. "It's only five o'clock."

Jimmy shook his shoulder. "Come on, snap out of it, Cash. Matt says it's important."

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Give me the phone. Hello, Matt. Do you know what time it is?"

Matt's voice was tense. "Never mind that; you're a milkman now, boss," he said. "Listen. We heard from your friends last night."

Jeff was instantly wide awake. "Rigsley and Burk?"

"Yeah. And Sam Heller. He's the manager of the bottle exchange. They broke up four hundred bucks' worth of our bottles at the exchange."

Jeff let out a long sigh. "Boy, this business is full of surprises. What's a bottle exchange?"

Matt's voice was incredulous. "That's the outfit which gathers empty bottles every day, washes them, sterilizes them, assorts them and sends them back to the companies that own them. The Dealers' Association runs the bottle exchange."

Jeff was slightly irritated. "Maybe it was an accident," he said. "Anybody could break a bottle."

Dugan exploded. "Listen, mister, that wiped out your profit on thousands of quarts of milk. Accidents like that don't happen. They're made. That's how the big three keep the boys in line. You better get out here. I got a hunch this is just the beginning."

Jeff hurried into his clothes. "They play kind of dirty in these parts," he remarked to Jimmy. "Did you find out anything about that girl last night? What's her name, anyway?"

"Greta Wagner," Jimmy replied. "I wasn't fooling when I said I thought she really was a nice girl. She's very well thought of around town, too."

"That's nice," Jeff said. "If I have to be shot, I suppose I should be grateful for the fact that I am going to be shot by someone who enjoys the esteem of her fellow citizens. I thought she was never going to leave here."

Jimmy scratched his head. "She didn't act like a whack. I did find out a few things. Her father died broke, except for what stock she has in the company here, and she has been a sort of public-relations representative out at the dairy. She organizes cooking classes and all kinds of promotional stunts like that. Of course, there's one thing that is sort of funny about it—she seems to be pretty chummy with our friend Rigsley."

"Everybody seems to be pretty friendly with our chum, Rigsley," Jeff remarked, leading the way toward the elevators, tying his tie as he went.

At the desk, a clerk said: "A letter for you, sir—air mail, special delivery."

It was the letter from Phineas Gardiner.

"We don't get the money," Jimmy

Ranger said, studying his employer's expression.

"We do not," Jeff said. "Send him a telegram: 'Situation extremely serious. Confronted with ruthless opponents. Will resort to any methods I deem necessary in view of your refusal to co-operate in reorganization company. Anything which transpires hereafter solely result of drastic situation into which you have forced me. Milk war imminent."

Jimmy grinned. "That'll just please him—you're not going to scare him any."

"Send it off," Jeff said. "It might worry him a little if he thought I was going to start excitement that would embroil him in newspaper headlines. He doesn't like that. Do we have a car?"

Matt Dugan had furnished them with a company car, and Jimmy, who had already been to the plant once, drove Jeff to the Clover Valley Dairy, which was located at the outskirts of the city, at the end of a dead-end street.

"Say, this is a pretty modern layout," Jeff exclaimed in some surprise as they drove through the gate in the walled-off courtyard to the plant.

The two-story buildings were modern, and the front of one in which the bottling process was taking place was glass inclosed and electrically lighted so that the operation could be seen from the second street running alongside of the plant.

"They must have put a lot of money in this place."

"Sure," Jimmy replied. "This was old man Wagner's pride and joy. When he built it, it was the most modern dairy plant in the State. Matt's probably on the other side. That's where the loading platforms are. You have to walk through the bottling room to get out there."

Jeff watched the bottles passing along in their electrical conveyor belt toward the cappers with almost as much interest as the men tending the machinery exhibited in their new boss.

Matt Dugan met him at the door to the loading platforms.

"Well, what do you think of the milk business?" he asked. Jeff looked around at the neat Clover Valley Dairy trucks onto which bottled milk was being loaded, and then let his eyes wander to another set of platforms at the far side of the building, where several oddly assorted and, in many cases, ancient, vehicles were unloading big milk tins.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Raw-milk delivery," Matt informed him. "From the farms."

"Those our trucks?"

Matt shook his head. "Nope, independent haulers."

"Do the farmers pay them or do we pay them?" Jeff asked.

"The farmers," Matt told him. "Each one of those drivers has a route where he picks up the milk every day. Some men have three of our trucks operating."

"Do they operate efficiently?" Jeff inquired.

"Naw," Matt said. "Some of 'em have twenty miles between stops in some spots, with other fellows who deliver to us picking up at the farms in between, but that's none of our worry, just so we get the milk. What I'm worried about is the bottles."

"Make a note of that milk-pick-up system," Jeff said to Jimmy. Turning to Dugan again, he said: "Stop talking in riddles, Matt. If the bottle exchange breaks our bottles they have to pay us for them, don't they?"

Dugan laughed. "Naw. All the companies belong to the bottle exchange, see. The exchange collects all the empties from the stores—"

"How about home-delivered milk?"

Dugan shook his head. "Naw. We pick those up ourselves. Every driver picks up from his customers, but the exchange handles all the bottles from grocery stores and retail outlets like that. That saves everybody plenty of money. The exchange gets all the bottles and washes and sterilizes and sorts them and then delivers them to us all ready to be filled. Everybody pays so much per month to the exchange, depending upon the number of their bottles handled in relation to the total. The charge is different every month, because the exchange figures to break even, but part of the agreement is that the exchange is not liable for broken bottles."

Jeff nodded. "So they broke four hundred dollars' worth of bottles—is that serious?"

"It's serious because they don't usually break ten bottles," Matt said. "Maybe they'll break four hundred tomorrow, and those bottles cost four and a half cents apiece. We figure to get fifty-five trips a bottle. Heavy breakage will begin driving that number down till maybe you're getting an average of forty trips, then twenty, and so on. That means your cost per quart is going up with every trip you knock off the bottle."

"And you think Sam Heller is doing this on purpose?"

"Sure he is," Matt said, adding profanely. "The Dealers' Association runs the bottle exchange, and the three big companies run the Dealers' Association. When anybody starts cutting prices or making deals to get a competitive advantage, Rigsley and Lee and Will Gregg of the County Dairy slip word along to Heller. Next day the guy's bottles begin getting busted and lost."

Jeff and Jimmy exchanged glances.

"All in the public interest, I guess," Jeff commented. "Let's go over and see Sam Heller."

SAM HELLER was lean and competent-looking. His eyes were large and pale blue. His face expressionless. He greeted Jeff cordially.

"S'pose you'd like to see the plant," he commented.

Jeff took a quick look around the machinery-cluttered room. "I catch the idea—continuous moving-track operation for the bottles." He stared evenly at Heller. "What happened tonight, Mr. Heller?"

"Just a little accident," Heller said vaguely. Jeff said nothing, continuing to stare at him. Heller ventured a further explanation, exceedingly involved. There was no possible way that so many bottles could have been broken except by extreme negligence or on purpose.

"Mr. Heller, your job depends upon the existence of a bottle exchange, doesn't it?" Jeff asked.

Heller nodded.

"There isn't going to be any bottle exchange if there's another accident like that," Jeff remarked. "No bottle exchange, no job."

Heller stared at him in astonishment, then began to laugh. "I'm afraid you don't understand the situation in Marlborough, Mr. Gorman," he said, seating himself on the top of a flat desk on the plant floor and swinging one leg idly back and forth. "Possibly you have an idea that you could operate without a bottle exchange, but there are ten other milk companies that want one. And as long as they want it, there will be one, and as long as there is one, you'll have to belong."

"Have to?" Jeff asked. Heller, he saw, was a little worried at his threat. Inasmuch as he had nothing with which to back it up, he could see that Heller had little reason to be worried, but he wanted to needle the man into showing his card.

"Have to—that's what I said," Heller replied. "One reason is that your costs would go up so high in proportion to those of the other companies that you'd only be biting off your nose to spite your face if you dropped out."

He smiled pleasantly, but there was no smile in his pale-blue eyes as he added somewhat triumphantly: "The other reason is more important. The bottle exchange does business on behalf of all companies with the retailers in the matter of empty bottles. How many customers do you think you'd keep if you decided to get along without the bottle exchange and told the storekeepers they would have to sort and stack your bottles and keep a separate set of books for your empties?"

Jeff saw his point.

"I understand that the exchange is not liable for any broken bottles here," he said.

"That's right." Heller smiled. "For instance, you'll have about a hundred and fifty gross of bottles clearing through here tomorrow—roughly a thousand dollars' worth of glass—and if all of them were broken, you couldn't do a thing about it. Catch?"

"Rigsley wouldn't have the nerve," Jeff said contemptuously.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Gorman," Heller replied blandly. "Accidents do happen, you know."

"Accidents like that might look very funny in print," Jeff snapped. "Or in court. You wouldn't care to be hauled in on a conspiracy charge, would you?"

Heller's smile faded, and he slid from the desk. "Are you threatening me?" he demanded, moving close to Jeff. "Don't do it. I've dealt with a lot of hard people, and you don't look very tough to me. And just in case you don't remember, it's illegal to threaten a man in this fashion."

Jeff shrugged his shoulders and looked at Matt Dugan and Ranger. "Did I threaten him?"

Matt shook his head, grinning. "I didn't hear anything."

Heller flushed. "Listen, you may think you're smooth, but just remember one thing—there used to be twenty-five milk companies around here, and there are eleven now. And when it comes to court, Clover Valley can't afford it. You've got too much dirty linen out there to go busting into court. You're on the verge of bankruptcy, mister, and you'd do pretty well to speak soft."

Jeff laughed: "I always speak softly. And carry a big club. Don't forget that, Heller. If there's going to be a milk war here, I'm ready for it. I have a war chest I can tap. Don't be too sure about Clover Valley going bankrupt. And don't forget that willful destruction of property is a felony."

Heller's eyes narrowed. "You talk a lot, Mr. Gorman, but it don't mean anything. Maybe I should tell you a funny story. It was about a fellow named Blake who ran the Consumer's Dairy Co. He decided he'd cut the price of store milk and steal a few customers. A lot of things happened to him, and one of them was that the bottle exchange got jammed up with business. We couldn't pick up any bottles from the stores that bought milk from

Blake, and pretty soon their empties began to pile up so high that it was cutting into their food-storage space. After a while a lot of them stopped buying from Blake. Wasn't that funny?"

Jimmy Ranger favored his employer with a dry glance as they left the bottle exchange. "Well, you sure scared the hell out of Brother Heller."

"Was I sinister?" Jeff grinned.

Jimmy nodded. "You reminded me of Bunny Rabbit."

WHEN Jeff returned to the plant, more at sea than ever, Holbridge, the company attorney, was there. "The suicide of Hanson was a terrible thing," he said, drumming on the table nervously with his long fingers. He was an aesthetic-looking man who wore a black ribbon pince-nez on a long, thin nose.

Jeff liked him immediately, and decided that Holbridge, at least, was trustworthy. It was therefore with considerable amazement he heard the lawyer say: "Can't understand how he came to leave me up there at the fishing camp last night if he had any idea there was anything wrong concerning the company."

"Haven't you been told what happened?" Jeff asked.

"Well, more or less," said Holbridge. "We didn't have a radio up there, and I just got back this morning. I wish Hanson had confided in me."

"Don't you realize that Hanson tricked you into staying up there? Don't you know that Hanson was working with Rigsley?" Cash asked.

Holbridge looked at him in genuine astonishment. "How do you know that?"

"Hanson told me," Jeff said. He explained the hearing in the courtroom and Hanson's subsequent actions.

Holbridge shook his head. "I would not have believed it." However, he didn't let his personal feelings interfere with his professional judgment. "We must have the books audited. Shall I recommend a C. P. A. firm?"

Jeff nodded. "Would you take care of that altogether? I was going to have Ranger do it, but I can use him elsewhere. I know it's an imposition, but —"

Holbridge scrutinized Jeff thoughtfully, as if he was sizing up the new president of the firm. "I'll be delighted to do anything I can for the company and Greta Wagner," he said finally. "Her father was one of my best friends, you know, and I've represented Clover Valley from the beginning."

It was Jeff's turn to drum the desk uncertainly with nervous fingers. "About Miss Wagner," he said. "Is she . . . ah— Of course, I realize she's a lovely young woman, but isn't she a trifle erratic—impulsive, so to speak?"

Mr. Holbridge apparently had a sense of humor. He smiled a little wanly. "She is a little headstrong at times," he admitted. "And sometimes her energy is misdirected. What did she do to you?"

Jeff explained.

Holbridge shook his head. "That worries me," he said. "I'm afraid she's on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She's a very intelligent girl, but she's had a lot of troubles. Her mother is perfectly helpless—used to having everything, and she worries the girl about her depleted income. And, of course, the company has been slowly going to pieces under their feet with all their money in it. Then, too, her father was accidentally killed in that last milk strike." Holbridge shook his head. "I'm afraid Rigsley has convinced her he's her only friend."

"Oh," said Jeff. "Like that—and she's on the board of directors!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GENTLEMEN BE SEATED.

JEFF purposely delayed his entrance into the board room until all the others had arrived and were seated.

"All ready, Jimmy?" he asked.

Ranger nodded, grinning.

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Put it on thick. I want a 'Yes, sir,' every time I say something to you. When we go in, pull out my chair. When I sit down, take the papers out of my portfolio and spread them before me. I'm a big, bad businessman from Wall Street." He turned to Holbridge: "All ready, Mr. Holbridge."

The attorney stroked his long chin, favoring Jeff with a whimsical glance, then answered: "All ready, Mr. Gorman."

"Right-o," Jeff said briskly. "Give the young lady her cue."

Jimmy stepped across the room to a bewildered-looking young woman by the name of Smith who had been Mr. Hanson's secretary. "You may inform the board of directors, Miss Smith, that Mr. Gorman is on his way. I will sit on Mr. Gorman's right. You and Mr. Holbridge will sit on his left. We want a complete transcript of the proceedings."

Miss Smith nodded mutely and walked through the door to the board room, closing it behind her as she had been instructed.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said. "Mr. Gorman is on his way."

The board looked collectively amazed at this formality. The door opened again briskly, and Jimmy stepped in, holding it back for the entrance of Mr. Holbridge, who entered, beaming an astute greeting, and took up his place at the foot of the table to the right of Jeff's vacant chair, standing behind Miss Smith.

"Gentlemen," Jimmy Ranger announced. "Mr. Gorman!"

Jeff strode forcefully into the room, pausing at the door to smile and bow briefly at the assemblage. He then surrendered his portfolio to Jimmy and advanced to his place at the foot of the table, while Jimmy hurriedly closed the door and rushed after him to pull back his chair.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Jeff said with polite formality. He looked at Mr. Holbridge. "I understand that everyone is present, Mr. Holbridge?"

The attorney bowed. "All the members of the board are present, Mr. Gorman. This is Miss Greta Wagner, whom I believe you have met."

"I have had the pleasure." Jeff bowed.

"This is Mr. Malcolm Rigsley," Holbridge continued. Rigsley, his carefully tended pink-and-white face flushing angrily and his already expansive chest expanding visibly, prepared to resist any attempt to overawe him.

"How do you do," he said shortly. Then his customary suavity reasserted itself and he added: "We're delighted to have you here, Mr. Gorman, and, as chairman of the board, I hope that we may rely upon your co-operation in carrying out our carefully planned policies for saving the Clover Valley Co. from getting into a further precarious position." He paused smoothly. "For our part, I am sure I can speak for all of us when I tell you that we will do all we can to assist you in . . . ah . . . familiarizing yourself with an . . . uh . . . industry with the operations of which you are possibly not as familiar as one might expect of a company's president."

Not to be outdone, Jeff, his face as bland as Rigsley's, bowed politely, remarking: "Very nice of you, Mr. . . . ah . . . ah—"

"Rigsley," Jimmy Ranger supplied sotto voce, but with sufficient audibility to be heard by all. Gray-haired Hiram Lee, bull-jawed, heavy-set president of Great Meadow Dairy, expelled his breath sharply and coughed with undue emphasis, his china-blue eyes watering and his thick neck reddening, and Howard Snyder, the lean, leathery-faced president of the First Standard Bank, a man who looked as if he spent a good many hours a year contemplating the follies of human nature with a fishing rod in his hand, found a sudden interest in the ceiling, his Adam's apple working convulsively.

Rigsley's suavity washed away in an instant and, flushed, he seemed on the verge of an outburst when Jeff continued coolly: "Very nice of you indeed, Mr. Rigsley. You may be assured that I will pay the greatest attention to even your most casual remark." He turned to Hiram Lee, adding: "Mr. Lee, I believe."

Lee nodded and reached down the table to shake hands. "Glad to know you, Gorman. This is Mr. Snyder, the president of the First Standard Bank."

"Always glad to meet a banker," Jeff smiled, shaking hands with Snyder, of whom he formed an instantly favorable opinion. This was a sound man, he decided, and a reasonable one who would listen and judge a case on its merits and possibilities.

He looked toward Jimmy Ranger, who respectfully pulled back his chair. "Let's be seated, gentlemen." Jeff bowed toward Miss Wagner. "Lady and gentlemen, I should say."

Sinking back comfortably in his chair, as if attending board meetings was a customary matter in his daily routine, Jeff composed his face in such blandly confident lines that even Jimmy Ranger was all but momentarily deceived into thinking that they had inherited a veritable gold mine of a company from which nothing could be expected except ever-increasing dividends.

The minutes of the last meeting having been disposed of, Malcolm Rigsley, as chairman, outlined the business before the board, none of which seemed very important. As he spoke, Jeff noted that Hiram Lee watched him carefully, alert for any trickery. The truce between these men was apparently an armed one.

"Due to the unfortunate accident which befell the general manager, Mr. Hanson," Rigsley concluded, "it becomes necessary for us to appoint a new general manager to take his place."

Jeff cleared his throat and looked at Rigsley innocently. "Mr. Chairman."

"Yes, Mr. Gorman."

"I hardly think it will be necessary for the board to appoint a new general manager. I have already done so. Mr. Matt Dugan, who has a long and splendid record with the company, has been named to the vacancy left by Mr. Hanson's death."

Rigsley, who apparently had had some one of his own choice ready to step into Hanson's shoes, stirred angrily, but before he could say anything, Jeff leaned forward and spoke sharply:

"By the way, Mr. Rigsley, just what was it you said to Larry Hanson yesterday just before he jumped out the window."

Rigsley smoothed out his features. "Why, I told him I . . . ah . . . hoped he'd be able to make you understand that the attitude you were taking toward the farmers' co-operative and your fellow company officials was not the sort of thing we were accustomed to here, and that I hoped he'd able to prevent you from doing anything further to inspire violence and . . . ah . . . chaos in our peaceful milk shed."

Jeff's black eyes were steel-hard. "Is that why he jumped out the window, Mr. Rigsley?" he asked sweetly.

"What do you mean by that?" Rigsley demanded excitedly. He quickly recovered his temper, adding: "You are quite careless with your language, Mr. Gorman. I've made every effort to be helpful to a young man in a position obviously . . . ah . . . beyond—that is, one not suited to his experience, but my patience has an end. And if you persist in such remarks—although I realize they may be attributable to carelessness and youthful impetuosity—I may be forced to institute suit for slander!"

Rigsley glanced around as if to impress upon the others present the reasonableness of his attitude in dealing with an obviously blundering and incompetent youth, his eyes lingering longest on Greta Wagner, who, Jeff could see, was much impressed.

Jeff laughed. "I appreciate your concern for my tender years, Mr. Rigsley, but I am still interested in knowing why it was that Mr. Hanson jumped through that window just after speaking with you." He paused, the smile disappearing from his face, leaving a hard, ruthless expression as he added slowly: "Particularly in view of the facts he related to me just prior to his meeting with you."

Rigsley sprang to his feet, his face flaming with his emotion: "Are you insinuating that I was in any way responsible for Hanson's death?" he shouted. He smashed the desk with his fist. "I demand an instant apology."

Jeff shrugged. "I merely asked a question. Why did Hanson commit suicide? You were the last man to talk with him. You should know best."

"He was distraught. Upset," Rigsley bellowed. "He had just come from talking with you, Mr. Gorman, and he was in a state of nervous collapse. Possibly you had better tell us the reason."

"I don't know the reason," Jeff said. "All I know is what he told me about you. Would you like to hear it?"

Rigsley's small eyes shot quickly to Greta Wagner's face. She stared tensely from him to Jeff, as Lee and Snyder, their expressions intent, silently watched the drama before them unfold.

"The ravings of a man in a disordered state of mind such as Hanson's just prior to taking his life could hardly be taken seriously, Mr. Gorman," Rigsley said, resuming his seat. "We—at least I did and I'm sure Miss Wagner did—knew that Hanson had been in an exceptionally nervous state as a result of the company's continued failure." He paused and looked scornfully at Jeff. "Doubtless when you, without having given him any chance whatever to defend his work, discharged him, his mind snapped."

"Oh, you unspeakable—" Greta Wagner's eyes flared. "With his wife ill and everything—after all the years. Why, father said he was one of the best men he had come across in his entire experience in the milk business—"

"Sentiment has very little place in business, Miss Wagner," Jeff commented dryly. "However, if it will make you feel any happier, I not only did not fire Hanson, but I assured him of his job and my protection—"

"Protection?" she asked scornfully. "Protection against what?"

Her eyes were filled with disbelief, but Jeff was not paying any attention to Greta Wagner. It was Snyder whom he was watching, and it was apparent that he, although silent, smelled a rat. Without appearing to do so, Snyder, doodling on a pad before him, was watching Rigsley now with what Jeff thought was a trace of suspicion.

Satisfied, Jeff said: "The matter in dispute concerned Mr. Dugan, whom I have named as general manager. Do I understand that the board is opposed to his selection?"

"The man has had absolutely no experience in management," Rigsley sneered. "I can't imagine a more inept choice."

"Possibly you could suggest someone else," Jeff said, his voice free of guile. "Someone possibly from your own organization whose services we might borrow—"

Lee and Snyder looked at him in amazement, Lee's jaw squaring with hostility at this suggestion.

"Why, yes, I was, as a matter of fact," Rigsley stated. "Merely as a pro-tem arrangement, of course—"

"Of course," Jeff interrupted dryly. "That's what I thought you were going to suggest, Mr. Rigsley, and now it becomes my duty to inform you of a fact that may be painful to you, which is that, although the approval of the board of directors is always desirable, under the by-laws of the corporation, the president is perfectly at liberty to select his own administrative executives. Mr. Dugan may not be experienced in management, but with the co-operation of my organization, I dare say I can take care of such management as escapes Matt. He knows the farmers and the workers. And he's young and tough. I feel, gentlemen, that I'm going to have need of some tough men in my organization. I think that closes that issue. Was there any other business you wished to call to our attention, Mr. Rigsley?"

Rigsley glowered. "I was not aware that—"

Jeff nodded, interrupting him to say: "Mr. Holbridge, read Mr. Rigsley the clause about the administrative powers of the president of the corporation."

Mr. Holbridge read the clause. Mr. Lee laughed outright. Snyder shrugged an indication of his helplessness in answer to a glance from Rigsley which all but said, "Are we going to put up with this from a rank outsider who doesn't know anything about the business?"

Rigsley ruffled through the papers before him. "The quarterly report of the treasurer is next," he said. "I will read that myself, in view of Mr. Hanson's unfortunate absence. I regret to say that the position of the company is exceptionally unfavorable, and—"

Jeff leaned forward quickly: "Mr. Chairman, I move that the quarterly report of the treasurer be tabled for the present."

They all stared at him. "Are you insane, man?" Rigsley demanded. His attitude was one of exasperation at this new annoyance, but Jeff thought he detected extreme tension in the man. "Motion is denied. I've never heard of anything so absurd—"

"Just a minute, please, Mr. Rigsley," Snyder put in. The thin, slow-moving banker adjusted his spectacles on his nose and peered through them at Jeff. "What's your object, Mr. Gorman?"

Jeff turned to him, speaking quietly. "As you know, Mr. Hanson was also our treasurer. I have reason to believe that this statement may not present a true report of the company's financial condition. I have instructed Mr. Holbridge to call in a firm of certified public accountants to go over our books. You can appreciate that, at this time, I wish to make no conclusive statements, but I feel that under the circumstances the report should be delayed pending the outcome of the audit. It would, I think, be injurious to make any moves with regard to the company's financial condition until we can be certain as to what that condition is."

Rigsley started to speak, but Snyder cut in quickly before he could say anything, asking: "On what do you base your opinion, Mr. Gorman?"

"Certain facts and certain suspicions," Jeff replied. "Not the least of which has to do with Hanson's death and remarks he made to me prior thereto which I don't feel at liberty to discuss at the present time. I must ask you to be patient with me in this matter. I don't feel free to put forth opinions which may later prove unjustified."

JEFF saw that his conservatism in this regard won him Snyder's support. Hiram Lee, scenting possibilities that might work to his advantage, was more curious, but Jeff refused to amplify his position further and asked for their confidence. Rigsley attempted to override him and have the report accepted as it was, apparently having in mind some plan to bring the company's affairs to a head which would undoubtedly result in its being thrown into immediate receivership, but Rigsley's persistence aroused Lee's opposition, and both Lee and Snyder voted with Jeff to temporarily table the report.

"I'll go along here with you," Lee said, still determined to dig out further information, "but I think you ought to give us a little broader base for a pretty grave accusation. After all, I represent the bondholders' protective committee, and I can force you to make your stand in this affair known if I want to, you know."

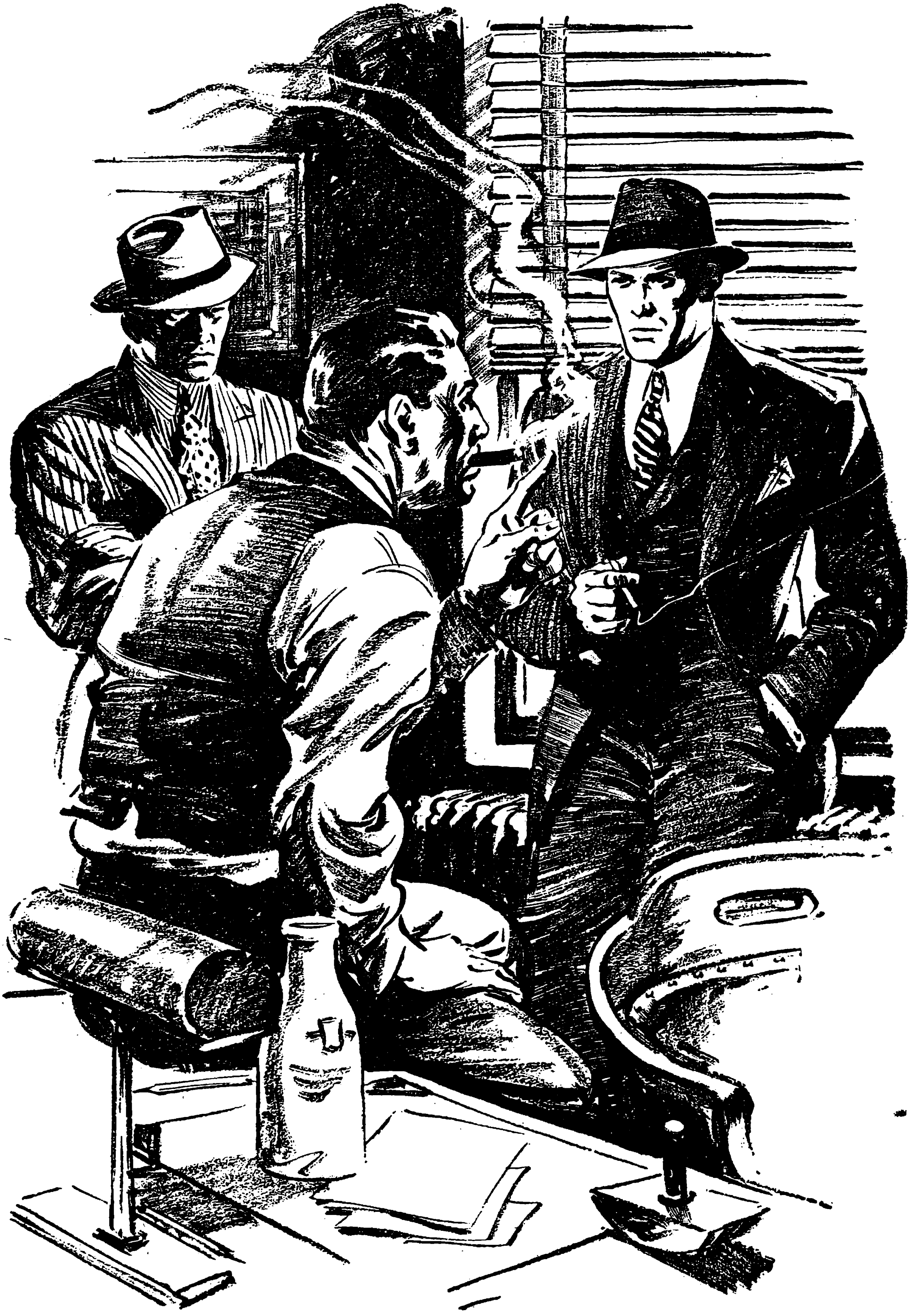
Jeff nodded gravely. "I know you can, Mr. Lee, but I hope you won't. For one thing, I feel that there are certain interests represented on this board which are opposed to those I represent and to the good of the company. Under the circumstances, I don't feel free to speak."

"I presume you're talking about me, Gorman," Rigsley snapped. "If so, I demand an explanation."

"I don't believe any explanation is necessary, Rigsley—not on my part, at least," Jeff said. "The interests which I represent have instructed me to put this company on its feet for the following purposes: One—to become a paying investment, or, two—so that it can be liquidated for the benefit of the stockholders in general, and without loss to them. I intend to accomplish those purposes, and I can't do it without the confidence and co-operation of my board of directors."

He paused briefly and looked toward Snyder. "So that the interests of the company itself be better represented, I move that the membership of this board be expanded by one and that Matt Dugan be elected to fill the new seat."

Rigsley laughed confidently. "Doubt-



Heller stared at Jeff in astonishment, then laughed; but it was quite evident that the threat worried him.

less you would like to bring your high-pressure Wall Street methods to Marlborough, Mr. Gorman, and pack our board, but the number of our directors is limited by the by-laws of the corporation to five."

Jeff leaned back in his chair and once more permitted his face to assume an expression of bland complacency. "I understand, however, that by unanimous action of the board itself, this number can be increased if any unforeseen contingencies should make such action necessary."

"I fail to see the necessity for any increase, Mr. Gorman," Rigsley purred. "I don't doubt but that I have the support of my colleagues."

"You have my support," Greta Wagner said. "And only one vote is necessary to defeat such a motion."

"In that event," Jeff said with equanimity, "it will be necessary to reduce the size of the board. As the by-laws make it imperative that the president be a member of the board, there naturally can be no question of myself resigning."

"What the devil are you trying to do, man?" Rigsley demanded. "Your conduct is positively childish!"

Jeff saw a sudden spark light Hiram Lee's poker face. Turning to the attorney, Jeff said: "Mr. Holbridge, will you favor us with the chapter and verse from the State Milk Control Board's regulations concerning the subject I brought to your attention earlier today?"

Holbridge readjusted his pince-nez on his nose and held up a copy of the regulations, which stated, in effect, that any farmer, or farm union or association selling milk to a dairy, and owning ten percent of the milk corporation's stock, must be admitted to the board of directors if the farmer stockholders so wished.

"That's perfectly clear, is it not?" Jeff asked Rigsley.

Rigsley stared at him suspiciously. "What's that have to do with the present case?"

"Why, Mr. Dugan is a farmer," Jeff explained, beaming around the board. "He has a half interest in the farm of his uncle, Mr. James Dugan. A Mr. Gram Dornman, who is also related to Mr. Dugan, also is a dairy farmer, and both he and Mr. James Dugan belong to the Marlborough Dairy Farmer's Association. In addition, the farm which Matt Dugan and his uncle run sells milk to the Clover Valley Dairy Co., thus they all three qualify in every way under the regulations of the milk board."

"But Matt Dugan doesn't own any ten percent in the company," Greta Wagner protested.

"Mr. Dugan, his uncle James Dugan, and Mr. Lorimer, now control ten percent of our stock," Jeff reported. "The transaction was made today."

Rigsley jumped to his feet, his face livid. "That's a phony," he yelled. "You can't get away with a trick like that!"

"Please, Mr. Rigsley, you'll burst a blood vessel," Jeff remonstrated. "The stock is duly made out in the names of the gentlemen in question, and Mr. Dugan has their proxy, representing ten percent in all."

"Who sold the stock to them—you?" Rigsley demanded.

Jeff nodded. Turning to the secretary, he said: "Ask Mr. Dugan to step in."

Jimmy Ranger leaned toward him, whispering: "Give him the other needle, pal; he needs an anæsthetic."

Jeff coughed behind his handkerchief,

muttering: "I'd be in a nice spot if Dugan crosses me up and keeps the stock, wouldn't I?"

"Just a philanthropist," Jimmy murmured.

Matt, his red hair tousled and a broad grin on his face, came in, the stock certificates gripped firmly in his hand. "What do you want, boss?"

"Show Mr. Rigsley your stock certificates," Jeff ordered. "He doesn't believe you have them—and your authorization to act for the other gentlemen as their representative on our board."

"Here they are, Rigsley." Dugan grinned, shoving the certificates under the milk executive's nose so abruptly that Rigsley jerked his head back as if he feared Matt's heavy red fist was going to collide with it.

"Matt!" Greta Wagner exclaimed. "I thought you were a friend of mine."

"I am, Miss Greta," Dugan said seriously. "That's why I'm doin' this—"

Rigsley's clenched fist struck the table. "This is a hoax. I won't permit it. This man didn't buy this stock. You just transferred it to his name, Gorman, and you can't get away with it. I'll—"

Jeff surged to his feet. "Wait a minute, Rigsley," he snapped. "You're doing a lot of talking, but the fact remains that Dugan and his associates possess the stock. You're faced with the result, my friend. Shall I make a motion that the membership of the board be enlarged, or is someone prepared to resign?"

"Nobody's going to resign, and I, as chairman, won't accept your motion," Rigsley stated.

Jeff laughed. "You'll only force Mr. Dugan to take legal steps to accomplish his admittance, Rigsley."

"That's perfectly satisfactory with me," Rigsley declared. "In the course of any legal action, you can depend upon it that I'll drag out of you under oath the circumstances surrounding the transfer of your stock to Dugan."

Jeff nodded placidly. "That's perfectly satisfactory with me, too, Rigsley. Mr. Dugan has already informed me that if any move was made to prevent his seating here, he would obtain a restraining order preventing further functioning of this board until the entire matter was settled in court."

Lee came to life suddenly. "Sit down, Mal, and take your medicine. They could drag this out in court for months while Gorman ran the company any damn way he pleased. I second the motion to increase the board membership to admit Matt Dugan."

Jeff could practically see Rigsley turning this matter over in his mind, seeking an angle.

"I don't think he's going to like you," Jimmy murmured.

Rigsley resumed his seat with ill grace. "Motion received and seconded to increase the board membership to six and admit Mr. Dugan."

Holbridge coughed and looked at Jeff warningly.

"Pardon me, Mr. Chairman. I think you misstated the wordage of the motion," Jeff said. "Read it back, please, Miss Smith."

Miss Smith read back: "Mr. Gorman: quote, 'I move that the membership of the board be increased to permit extending membership to Mr. Dugan.' "

"Very well," Rigsley said irritably. "Are there any dissenting votes?"

Greta Wagner was disturbed. "Can't we do anything, Malcolm?"

"Not without taking it into court and

letting this young fool run the company just as he pleased."

"Thanks for your confidence," Jeff remarked somewhat dryly. "Do I take it the motion is passed?"

It was.

"Splendid," Jeff said briskly. "I move that Mr. Ranger, my assistant, who is also a stockholder, be admitted to the seventh membership of the board."

"What are you talking about?" Rigsley shouted. "Who said anything about a seventh membership."

Jeff looked at him in beautifully simulated surprise. "Why, we just voted to increase the number of directors so as to seat Mr. Dugan, and naturally we have to increase the membership to seven. The bylaws of the company prohibit an even number of directors. He turned to Holbridge. "Read that section for Mr. Rigsley, Mr. Holbridge?"

The attorney fixed the pince-nez to his nose and read the section sonorously.

Mr. Rigsley was not in the best of humor. "Very, very clever, Mr. Gorman," he said churlishly. "Worthy of a Philadelphia lawyer. However, I warn you that such tricks will not long avail you in Marlborough. We have a high standard of business ethics here, and shysters don't sit well with our people." He looked at the other directors. "I suggest that the selection of a seventh director be deferred until our next meeting."

"I make that a motion," Hiram Lee boomed. He had been getting rare enjoyment out of Rigsley's discomfort, but he failed to see anything good in a board packed with Gorman's directors.

"I'll sec—" Greta Wagner began.

"Just a minute, Miss Wagner," Jeff interposed quickly. "Before you say anything further, I'd like to explain the present position of all concerned in the company. Mr. Snyder, of course, represents the bank. We need say little about that except that the bank is unhappy about the whole affair. Mr. Lee is a very small stockholder, but he represents the bondholders' protective committee. He's also a very small bondholder, but that is neither here nor there. In both his capacity as a bondholder and as president of Great Meadow, he wants to see the company thrown into receivership and its physical properties liquidated. He would probably bid on its plant facilities himself. If someone else bid higher, he would not be brokenhearted. As the biggest independent, he figures he would get the lion's share of our trade, anyway. However, he doesn't want to see any competitive company rising from the ashes of Clover Valley. And he doesn't want to see it continued as a subsidiary. How about it, Mr. Lee?"

Lee's bulldog face remained impassive as he answered the question, addressing Greta: "I'm not responsible for the condition of the company, Greta. My position is simply that of any good businessman."

Tight-lipped and pale-faced, she turned her eyes inquiringly back to Jeff, who was disappointed to find her no less hostile than before.

"Mr. Rigsley, on the other hand—"

"I don't need you to explain my views to Miss Wagner," Rigsley cut in. "Greta, you seconded Mr. Lee's motion, did you not?"

"I did," she said.

"O. K.," Jeff said, but his appearance of giving in was only surface deep. He needed complete control of this board or he could be hamstrung at every move. "But I want to explain this to you, anyway. Mr. Rigsley is no less interested than Mr. Lee in seeing this company fail. After all, he is a competitor, and the national policy of his company is directed toward the elimination of all competition unessential to the appearance of a free market. However, he wants to keep Clover Valley operating as a subsidiary with local dummies functioning as its front and expanding its present business at the expense of Lee and the small independents. The worse the position of the company when it fails, the better for him. His outfit isn't interested in the bondholders or the stockholders, their own shares held in his name, included. The worse off the company is in receivership, the smaller would be the percentage of the new shares necessary to obtain consent for reorganization and recapitalization of the company. And he's using you, Miss Wagner, to help him."

"There isn't a word of truth in what he says," Rigsley snorted at Greta, his eyes bloodshot with anger. He smashed his fist to the table. "Gorman, you've carried your damn lying far enough. You'll answer for this. I swear it. This meeting is adjourned."

Matt Dugan leaped to his feet and shook his fist under Rigsley's nose. "He's not lying, and you know damn well he isn't. You're trying to get this company, and we know it. Hanson said so. He was in it with you."

"Shut up, Dugan!" Rigsley roared. "You've been taken in by these two swindlers, but you'd better come to your senses and figure out which side your bread is buttered on before it is too late."

Jimmy Ranger spoke for the first time. Planting his hands flat on the conference table, he leaned halfway down it and yelled. "You better button up your own lip, Rigsley. Cash has taken care of tougher babies than you, mister, and we don't like being framed. That farce in court yesterday wasn't even a good frame. It was just raw. Hanson told us about that, too."

Greta Wagner pulled herself to her feet. "Stop it," she screamed hysterically, "stop it!"

They all looked at her.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Greta," Rigsley exclaimed, stepping quietly to her side. She jerked him away and looked at Hiram Lee wide-eyed.

"Is it true?" she asked. She nodded at Jeff. "Is it true what he said about your motives and Malcolm's?"

Lee avoided her eyes. "You've al-

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ready seconded my motion," he evaded. The more he saw of Gorman the less he liked the idea of Jeff having full sway on the destinies of Clover Leaf. "The matter's settled. Your vote, Rigsley's and mine tables action regarding a seventh director."

"I want to know if what he said is true?" Greta demanded. She was trembling with emotion.

"My God!" Lee exploded. "Women in business! How the hell do I know whether it's true? I can't read Rigsley's mind, and I'm not here to make up yours for you. If you can't think for yourself, why don't you get married and wash somebody's dishes."

Greta's eyes turned to Snyder, who was watching her sympathetically. "Howard, what's the real truth?"

"My dear, I'm just here to safeguard the bank's interests to the best of my ability," Snyder said. "However, the bank's intention is mutually allied to the interests of the company's welfare, and I'm voting with Mr. Gorman. He may have a fighting chance."

Greta Wagner sat down weakly. "You mean it is true. We didn't have any chance before."

Lee and Rigsley both stared savagely at the banker.

"The First Standard Bank will not get a nickel of my business," Lee thundered.

"Well, it never has," Snyder retorted calmly. He turned to the secretary. "Miss Smith, get Miss Wagner a glass of water, please."

"I'm all right," Greta exclaimed, her color beginning to return. Her eyes stabbed Rigsley with an angry glance. "I'm voting with Mr. Gorman, also."

Jeff smiled warmly down the table at her. "Thank you," he said. He turned to Jimmy Ranger. "Mr. Ranger, you are now a member of the board of directors."

Jimmy nodded. "Life is full of little surprises," he murmured. "What do I do now?"

"You move that I be made chairman, and Matt, you second the motion."

Rigsley, no longer his dapper self, stuck a finger in his collar band to loosen it and shouted: "You can't do that."

"Maybe we started off on the left foot," Jeff remarked. "The unforeseen contingencies mentioned in the by-laws having passed, I believe we had best revert to a five-man board of directors, and so move. That let's you out, Mr. Rigsley; and, unfortunately, you, too, Mr. Lee. However, we'd be glad to consolidate with Great Meadow if you're interested. A straight merger."

"I'll see you in hell first," Lee remarked shortly. "My personal opinion is that this isn't legal. You'll hear from my attorney."

"And mine, too," Rigsley shouted. Seizing his hat, he stormed out of the room without even looking at Greta Wagner.

"Nothing personal, Mr. Lee, but I don't like the idea of having my competitors on my board," Jeff said, "and before either you or Rigsley get back on this board, I will see you both in hell."

"Looks like a hot time in the old town," Jimmy Ranger remarked.

CHAPTER IX.

RAIDERS ON PROWL.

RIGSLEY, puffing furiously at his cigar, his customary composure badly ruffled, waited impatiently in front of the office of the Clover Valley Dairy for the appearance of Hiram Lee.

"I sent my chauffeur along to the office," he told Lee when the Great Meadow president finally appeared. "I wanted to speak with you."

"Certainly," Lee said, his grim face almost creased into a smile. "My car's right over here! Tough customer, isn't he?"

Rigsley settled himself down in the seat beside Lee. "He has a hundred or more gross of bottles piled up at the exchange as the result of this strike. I had Heller delay their delivery on purpose."

Lee started. "That's over five thousand dollars' worth of bottles."

"The exchange isn't responsible," Rigsley pointed out. "We'd better break him and get him out of here."

"Blasting him out of Clover Valley means putting the company under. We've been blocking each other on that, but I'm ready if you're prepared to give up this subsidiary idea," Lee said. "We can throw him into receivership tomorrow."

Rigsley shook his head. "No. I'm sorry, Hiram, but I want Clover Valley. However, I'll make a deal with you. Throw Gorman into receivership and let me have a free hand in reorganizing and I'll cancel my cheese line. That'll mean a fat increase in business to you."

Lee looked at Rigsley suspiciously. "You must want Clover Valley very badly—"

Rigsley said nothing.

"Do you have authority to do this?" Lee asked.

"I'll put the agreement in writing," Rigsley said.

"O. K.," Lee answered.

JEFF was burning the midnight oil when Holbridge, working with the accountants, entered his office. The elderly attorney looked fatigued after his unaccustomed long day.

"You'd better get some rest," Jeff said. "How does it look?"

Holbridge shook his head. "Bad!"

Jeff pushed aside a pile of books on milk production, marketing and general information, agricultural pamphlets, briefs on legal decisions concerning milk laws in the State, surveys of legislation, milk-board rulings and a two-year-old analysis of the milk situation in the city.

"Tell me the worst," he said wearily.

"Well, I've been into everything thoroughly with the cashier, and, aside from anything the audit may show, you only have about seventeen thousand dollars in operating funds available for immediate expenses after meeting current expenses which cannot be deferred."

Jeff expelled a long breath. "Whew! That's sweet. Not a nickel's worth of reserve."

Mr. Holbridge polished his pince-nez. "Well?"

Jeff laughed. "You go home and sleep—and a thousand thanks. See you tomorrow."

Jeff turned back to his literature, but his mind wasn't on it. He sighed, recalling his last conversation with Howard Snyder after the board meeting.

"How's my credit with the bank?" he had asked.

Snyder had smiled. "With any bank —awful." He had lowered his spectacles and looked at Jeff over them. "You can believe me when I tell you no bank in town would let you have a nickel for anything."

Jeff had nodded. "I won't waste my time."

"I'd like to help," Snyder said. "I

did my best to help you today, as a matter of fact, but I can't extend any financial aid. My directors are already on my neck for having extended credit to Clover Valley in the past. The 'assets' securing our loans have become so involved or depreciated by the rapid fluctuations in the company's position that they're almost hopeless. If you can do anything for the company, you have my support as far as I can go." He looked at Jeff shrewdly. "I suppose the interests you represent feel it's a turkey and simply told you to save it if possible and, if not, to salvage what you could."

"More or less," Jeff had told him, adding with his fingers crossed, "however, if a real possibility of placing the company on its feet can be seen, that would change matters in the eyes of my people."

Snyder had absorbed this hint of possible financial backing from the Gardiner interests thoughtfully, then added: "Well, if you can bring it along that far, you're either a fool for luck or a financial wizard." He had chuckled dryly: "Probably both."

The telephone interrupted Jeff's mournful cogitations. "I've just been checking up with Kirk," Jimmy Ranger reported excitedly. "We found out that before Burk came here he was connected with a co-operative marketing association in Ohio in the same capacity he holds here. He moved in here with plenty of money five years ago, bought a farm, and immediately oozed into the new association which had just been formed. The farmers of the outfit he belonged to in Ohio were also dealing with the local dairies of the Continental and Great Lakes chains. Maybe there's a connection, huh?"

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Tell Kirk to forget Burk. You get on your horse and trot over to Ohio and see what you can root out about Burk's dealings there from his former associates. Dig up all the dirt you can. Hire detectives if necessary."

"What am I going to do for dough?" Jimmy asked.

"Use your own," Jeff suggested practically. "And don't tell me you don't have any. You've got a sock three feet deep. I'll wire you some money out of company funds tomorrow."

There was a pregnant silence on the other end of the wire, Jimmy Ranger being a man who would give up a nickel as cheerfully as he would throw away his right arm. "Has the company got any funds?" he asked finally.

"We have enough to send you to Ohio," Jeff said. "I'll send you five hundred dollars in the morning. If you have to get Connelly's dicks on the job, tell him to cuff it for the time being."

"O. K.," Ranger said, but not cheerfully. "What are you going to operate that outfit with—or don't people around here consider money important?"

"Why, we have seventeen thousand dollars in the till," Jeff told his confederate airily.

"How long will that last?" Jimmy inquired. "Three days?"

"We ought to be able to stretch it to four," Jeff said.

"That's nice," Jimmy commented dryly. "After that, what's the program, O great maestro? Issue our own paper?"

"What was that?" Jeff shouted suddenly.

"Skip it," Ranger said.

"What did you say about paper?"

"I said 'what are we going to do after we run out of money, issue our own paper?' "

Jeff's face lighted up happily. "Jimmy, I think you've got something," he whooped. "Get your plane for Ohio, mister; we're on our way." Slamming up the receiver, he searched hurriedly through the mass of literature before him and came upon one entitled: "Paper Containers For Milk."

AT two o'clock the next afternoon, Jeff was ushered into the office of Llewlyn Bran, president of Sealsafe Paper Container Corp.

Bran, a small, alert man who affected owlish horn-rimmed spectacles, extended a cordial hand. "I received your telegram this morning, Mr. Gorman. I'm delighted to see you."

"Thanks," Jeff said, seating himself in the chair to which Bran waved him and declining a cigar. "Shall I tell you something about the milk situation in Marlborough?"

"I think I know it as well as you do," Bran smiled. "Does that save us time?"

Jeff laughed. "It does." He studied Bran thoughtfully for a moment and then said. "I assume that you have familiarized yourself with my background and connections."

Bran nodded again and chuckled. "Not only that, but I read with considerable interest the accounts of your arrival in Marlborough. I received a wire this morning, also, which I found interesting. It quoted a Marlborough news item stating there had been a change in your board of directors."

Jeff laughed. "I got rid of the boys."

Bran lighted a cigar and wreathed himself in smoke. "Well, your telegram was intriguing, Mr. Gorman."

"You've never been able to get a foothold with paper in our stores, have you?" Jeff asked.

Bran shook his head. "Unfortunately, you are right."

"Once you broke down the Marlborough market you should have no difficulty elsewhere," Jeff said, half as a question and half as a statement of fact.

"It's the biggest market in the State," Bran agreed. "That seems a safe statement."

"Would it be worth two hundred thousand dollars to you to put paper into Marlborough in such quantity that eventually the whole industry would be forced to adopt a paper-container line, as well as a full container line, out of protection?"

Bran snapped forward in his chair. "That's real money," he exclaimed.

"You'd spend that much for advertising, promotion, merchandising and lobbying if you thought you could establish paper permanently in the State."

Bran nodded. "Under favorable circumstances."

"Lend my company that much money and I'll put paper into Marlborough so solidly they'll never shake it," Jeff said earnestly.

Bran smiled and edged forward in his seat. "Possibly you've noticed, I'm a good listener, Mr. Gorman."

Matt Dugan and Bill Kirk met Jeff at the airport the next morning on his return.

"You look inordinately cheerful," the newspaperman remarked.

"I've been selling my soul for a mess of pottage," Jeff grinned.

"That's always nice if enough pottage is involved, but I'm afraid you're a little late," Kirk informed him mournfully. "Have a look at this paper."

In bold headlines, the newspaper proclaimed:

BONDHOLDERS SEEK RECEIVERSHIP FOR CLOVER VALLEY—ASK COURT TO APPOINT ADMINISTRATOR FOR COMPANY PENDING OUTCOME LITIGATION.

Jeff waved Kirk toward a phone booth. "Get Holbridge on the wire," he said. "Matt, how are things going with the farmers?"

"Everything was going fine until this receivership business was announced on the radio," Dugan replied, shaking his head. "Gee, this is tough. I told the boys we could back 'em up, but as soon as they heard about this they began calling up and telling me off. Accused me of trying to swindle them, and wanted to know where they'd be if the company went under and they'd got themselves in dutch with all the other companies and their own association as well."

Jeff patted Matt's shoulder. "Don't let it get you, boy. We're not licked."

Kirk called Cash to the phone booth.

Holbridge's voice snapped. The elderly attorney was mad. "Lee did this," he said. "Got the bondholders together last night. He and Rigsley must have come to some agreement."

"What can we do legally?" Jeff asked.

"Seek delays," Holbridge said.

"That won't do," Jeff said. "We can't fight with a receivership hanging over us. Who are these bondholders?"

Holbridge considered. "Generally speaking, businessmen around town—local merchants, doctors, lawyers, small manufacturers, retired farmers and business people."

"Good," Jeff said. "Nobody has a particularly large holding?"

Holbridge replied in the negative, and Jeff inquired about Lee.

"He bought his bonds about two years ago. He may have twenty-five thousand dollars' worth, certainly not more," Holbridge said.

"Get the bondholders' protective committee together at the bank this afternoon," Jeff said. "Get as many of the bondholders as possible to attend the meeting," Jeff concluded. Hanging up, he turned to Kirk. "Hear that?"

Bill nodded. "And what?"

"See that the next issues of the newspapers carry a story that I've requested the bondholders to meet with me at the First Standard Bank. Just a minute and I'll check with Snyder about using his board room."

"You're troubles have just started," Kirk said. "Rigsley called a special meeting of the milk dealers' association for one o'clock this afternoon. The boys are going to lay down the law to you."

Jeff laughed eagerly. "That's what they think," he said. "We'll beat them to the punch by resigning from the association. That ought to cause a little turmoil. Tell Holbridge I want him to represent me there. He's to give them the choice of giving in to the strikers' demands or lose our membership. The big three will force them to stand pat and we'll pull out. Ought to help us with the public."

Matt Dugan shook his head nervously. "You can't do that," he complained.

"Why not?" Jeff asked.

"Well, you just can't," Matt said. "Nobody ever has."

"Everybody else is breaking precedents this year," Jeff said. "There's no reason why we shouldn't break a couple."

"Yeah—but they run everything," Matt said. "We'd have all kinds of trouble on our hands. They've got the milk board and all the politicians sewed up, and—"

"Forget it, Matt," Jeff said. "We have so many bridges to cross we might just as well take 'em as they come. How many farmers phoned you this morning?"

"Well, my relatives phoned me first, then I ducked out," Matt replied.

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Don't answer the phone any more. Orders to everyone are that they have no knowledge of the receivership. Kirk, contact the financial editors of the newspaper again and tell them they're welcome to attend the bondholders' conference this afternoon."

Kirk looked doubtful. "Do you think that's wise?"

"I'd rather have them there than have them get a garbled account afterward from someone else—no matter how it goes," Jeff said. "What we want is public confidence—and the confidence of our farmer producers. Remember, in all your contacts with the press, that although I and the interests I represent are outsiders, we came into the picture more or less by accident. We had nothing to do with the situation into which the company had sunk. We still own less than half the stock. The bondholders are almost entirely local men. In other words, this is a local industry on the skids and taking local money with it. We're trying to save it. That's always a popular cause."

At the bank, Snyder greeted Jeff with a long face. "I don't know how you can lick this," he said.

Jeff slapped a check down in front of him. Snyder blinked. "Two hundred thousand dollars!" He examined it with amazement. "The Safeseal Corp. Great heavens, what have you done now?"

"Just a loan," Jeff said. "They liked my honest, homely face and, saying here's a virtuous young man from the West who should be helped out, they loaned me two hundred thousand dollars."

"At what interest?" Snyder demanded. "And on what terms?"

Jeff slid a contract before the banker. "Here are the terms. The interest is two and a half percent over a five-year period, no interest payments to fall due for one year, and no payment against principal for two years."

"In other words, they are lending you the money so you can install a container bottling unit and buy containers from them," the banker said.

"I won't have to buy that many containers for a long time," Jeff commented.

The banker read the contract carefully, his mouth finally twisting into a wry smile: "It looks like you've slipped a joker into the deck."

PEERING into the spacious board-of-directors room of the bank a few minutes prior to the scheduled time for the bondholders' meeting, Jeff found it crowded with men and a few women, revolving in small, talkative groups.

"They certainly did turn out, considering the short notice," Jeff commented to Bill Kirk.

"Holbridge put his entire office to work calling people up, and I had it in both opening market editions of the papers and on the radio," Kirk replied. "Here comes Greta Wagner. Wow! That's what they mean when they say 'oomph'!"

Jeff moved forward to meet her. Extending his hand, he said: "Thank you for what you did at that board meeting the other day. I wanted to thank you then, but when I looked for you I found you'd already left."

"That's . . . that's all right," she said, looking up at Jeff with a faint smile. "I'm sorry about . . . well, everything that happened. Mr. Holbridge—isn't he an old dear, though—pleaded with me before the meeting to support you, but he didn't know—well, how things were, and I was so wrought up. I guess I've been on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I really felt as if everything was going to be all right yesterday, and then"—her voice broke a little and Jeff was flustered to discover her large, dark eyes filling with tears—"then this had to happen. It just seems we can't have anything good happen. Father's death and everything gradually slipping away."

Jeff patted her hand reassuringly. "Now don't you worry," he winked. "I'm going to give it to them with both barrels. We've got money to carry on with—two hundred thousand dollars!"

Her eyes lighted up. "Oh! How wonderful!" Her whole face came to life, and the worried lines washed away. "Oh, they'll have to have confidence in you. I know they will. Mr. Holbridge and Howard Snyder both advised me to do everything I could to help you, and I know they're sincere—and I know you are, too."

Jeff cleared his throat, putting a delicate question to her: "Are you and Malcolm Rigsley—"

"No," she declared stormily. "I never want to see him again. After what happened yesterday, I'm convinced he's up to some terrible trickery. He . . . he . . . that is, I thought he was the only real friend I had, and that I could rely on him. You should have heard the way he distorted the situation to make it look as if he were trying to save a competitive company just for my sake." Her eyes began to fill up again. "I've been a little fool."

Jeff shook his head. "Uh-uh! None of that, now. We're going to be all right. All I need to fill out a flush is the right word from these bondholders, and you can help me get it."

"How?" she asked eagerly.

"Just go over there where Mr. Snyder is standing and take one of those chairs," he replied, nodding toward the board room. "I'm going to sit beside you. And I may ask you to make a little speech. When I do, don't bother about business. Just get up and give with the emotions, darling."

She laughed a little, coloring. "Don't you ever take anything seriously?" she asked.

"You'll never know how serious I am about this," he said. "This isn't for anyone's ears but your own, but every nickel I have is tied up in Clover Valley Dairy."

She stared at him. "Not really?"

He nodded, explaining how he had come to be interested in the company. "I just wanted you to know how much the success of the company means to me. Now run along. I'll be right in."

She laughed a little. "I can't run very fast—you're still holding my hand."

Kirk strolled up beside him as she left. "You just want to be an uncle to her, I presume."

"You presume too much, Bill," Jeff laughed.

Holbridge, who had been watching them, approached, saying: "I haven't seen Greta look so well in months. I was a little worried about her for a time. I knew her father very well, you know." He adjusted his pince-nez and added unsmilingly: "You seem to have reassured her to a remarkable extent."

Jeff nodded. "I told her we had two hundred thousand dollars to play with —round figures like that are always reassuring."

Holbridge started. "If you stole it, don't tell me anything about it."

"Let you know later," Jeff said. "They seem to be ready for us. Do you think Lee will make trouble?"

The lawyer nodded. "Undoubtedly. He and Rigsley must have come to an agreement or he wouldn't have made this move today."

"In other words, Rigsley gave him something in return for a free hand and this action to place us in a receivership?" Jeff inquired.

Holbridge nodded.

Snyder agreed with this opinion in a brief conversation before the banker called the meeting to order and introduced Mr. Gorman to it.

Jeff smiled at Hiram Lee, who returned his glance without expression.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jeff began, looking around seriously. "Up until the present time you have had, for many months past, due cause for asking that the Clover Valley Dairy Co. be placed in receivership. Today, however, conditions have changed. I am happy to inform you that within the past twenty-four hours the company has negotiated a loan of two hundred thousand dollars with which to carry on its business—new lifeblood." He paused and looked toward Lee as a startled murmur ran about the room. Lee's poker face dissolved into blank incredulity.

"Our company was able to negotiate this substantial loan at the exceptionally low interest rate of two percent per annum, no payments on interest of principal to be made for two years."

Jeff let this sink in, then continued. "It was unnecessary, to post any collateral whatsoever for this loan, the company making it having sufficient confidence in the company's executives, its new policy, and in the competitive position of the company in relation to its field, to make the loan on the basis of the company's good faith and ability to regain its former prominent and prosperous position in the field. I regret that at the present time I am unable to reveal any further details, but the facts which I have set before you are those essential to your decision."

Lee started to arise to his feet, and Jeff, forestalling his question, turned to Howard Snyder. "Mr. Snyder, who is both president of this institution and a member of our *new* board of directors, is familiar with the details of the loan which I have described, and in a position to assure you of the correctness of my statements concerning this loan."

Snyder nodded his head. "The financial terms are as stated by Mr. Gorman."

"Who is this Santa Claus?" Hiram Lee demanded.

"For several reasons, that is something that I can't disclose at the present time," Jeff replied. He heard the name "Phineas Gardiner" and the term "Wall Street money" run around the room.

"I fail to see any possible reason for mystery concerning such a matter, Mr. Gorman," Lee snapped. "The committee of which I am chairman is entitled to know all the facts in any decision pertaining to a matter as important as this."

"The essential factor is that the company has money with which to revitalize itself, and in addition, the money has been obtained under such circumstances that the bondholders cannot be affected adversely by the success or failure of our future policies," Jeff retorted sharply, then addressed himself to the meeting as a whole. "You have everything to gain and nothing to lose. With this new financing, the management of the company feels that it will be able to re-establish its business to its former prosperity, benefiting yourself as bondholders by restoring your certificates to their former value, benefiting the farmers of the Marlborough milk shed, giving employment to hundreds of people, directly and indirectly, and retaining an old and respected local company. The decision, ladies and gentlemen, rests entirely with you."

He stepped back to his seat as a hubbub of conversation swept the room. "Get up and give, darling," he whispered to Greta Wagner, who sprang to her feet and delivered an eloquent and emotional appeal to local pride.

There was a storm of applause. Hiram Lee's fellow committee members gathered around him, and it was apparent that heated argument ensued. Lee finally waved for silence.

"As your representative, I can't countenance this matter. It's entirely unorthodox. It's cloaked with too much mystery and smells of trickery to me," he shouted.

Jeff sprang to his feet. "Mr. Lee, you've been counseling patience for months when the company had no hopes. Why, now, when there is hope, do you wish to force a receivership on the company?"

Complete silence engulfed the room at the veiled accusation in Jeff's speech.

"Because certain local interests, as I long ago foresaw, are now anxious to reorganize the company!" Lee roared. "There may not be such an opportunity in a few more weeks or even days."

Jeff had to spike this. "I challenge your sincerity, Mr. Lee. Two years ago, when Clover Valley bonds were already exceedingly depressed in value, you bought them. Soon thereafter you organized the bondholders' protective committee. Your bonds now are considerably lower in value than they were when you bought them, but I personally offer now to buy them at the price at which you purchased them, and in addition will pay you such interest on them as would have been paid had the company been in a position to meet the interest."

Lee blinked. "I . . . ah—" He groped for something to say and couldn't find it. If he continued his opposition, he would be accused of attempting to gut a local industry for personal reasons, and he knew any such action would react unfavorably against him, both personally and in relation to his company. "I reserve my decision," he said finally. "Anything the committee wishes to do, I'll go along, but with grave misgivings."

The committee for the bondholders decided on the spot to drop its legal action, and businessmen crowded around Jeff to shake hands with him and wish him luck.

Kirk put both thumbs up. "That's going to look good in print," he said. "First thing you know we'll be popular."

Jeff nodded nervously. "We've done a lot of gabbing. We better get busy and produce. Get hold of your radio news friends and tell them the bondholders gave us a vote of confidence. Then tell Dugan to contact his farmers again and get that milk rolling in here. It's getting late. If the regular haulers can't get the job done, tell him to hire all the trucks he needs. Put the whole delivery in fluid milk. We won't have to worry about surplus tomorrow. And call the newspapers and tell them to hold a page of advertising open for us. Two pages. We're going to tell the public our story in big type."

Hiram Lee stopped in front of Jeff.

"You're asking for more trouble than you've ever heard of, young man," Lee said. "The milk industry here is sewed up. A very few companies actually run it in this State, and we control the politicians. A lot of things can happen to people who step out of line."

"Why don't you take a seat on the fifty-yard line, Hiram?" Jeff smiled. "I'll make a bet you're just holding the bag for Rigsley, now. You sold out to him as far as Clover Valley is concerned, and you can't deliver the price: receivership!"

"You're right there," Lee said unexpectedly. "I'm not going to cry about that. But we've got a carefully balanced method of doing business here, and we're not going to let you upset it. We don't want a free market."

Jeff wasn't surprised at his frankness. Lee was putting his cards down. "It looks like a war," he said. "I have to have a free market or I'll choke to death. Why don't you throw in with me and we'll bust the hell out of it and pick up all the pieces for ourselves."

Lee shook his head. "I always bet on the champion until he's licked."

Snyder joined Jeff. "Did he sell you his bonds?" the banker asked.

Jeff sighed gratefully. "No. Thank the Lord!"

"Don't you want 'em?" Snyder asked.

"Not exactly," Jeff replied. He didn't expand, feeling the banker might not be appreciative of the fact that Jeff couldn't pay his own hotel bill, let alone be purchasing Lee's bonds.

CHAPTER X.

NO HOLDS BARRED.

KIRK rushed triumphantly into Jeff's office late that evening and slapped the first editions of the morning papers down on his desk, crying: "Look at that!"

Flaring headlines proclaimed:

MILK WAR BEGINS—GORMAN MOVES TO BREAK STRIKE—DENOUNCES BIG THREE AS MONOPOLY—CLOVER VALLEY BREAKS WITH MILK DEALERS' ASSOCIATION: MEETS FARMERS' TERMS.

"Great stuff!" Jeff exclaimed, scanning the leads of the story which covered the front pages. "We're the heroes this time."

Lem Clark, the sales manager, burst into the office. "Matt said to tell you we're going to make deliveries tonight, all right. He wants plenty of protection for the trucks. Can you get the sheriff to give us men?"

Jeff snapped his fingers excitedly. "Atta boy; we're getting the breaks now. I'll get in touch with the sheriff right away. How many farmers has he got lined up?"

"Damn near every one of our old men," Clark said exultantly. "And about ten men who don't like Burk. They like our price, and they like breaking with the Milk Dealers' Association."

Jeff's telephone rang. It was Holbridge. "Mr. Gorman, we're in a jam," the lawyer said. "The Dealers' Association is moving to get an injunction restraining you from negotiating as an individual company with the farmers."

"On what grounds?" Jeff demanded, his heart sinking.

"They pulled a fast one on us," Holbridge told him. "The State Milk Control Board held an emergency meeting this afternoon and passed a regulation that in any milk shed where the board has approved collective-bargaining agencies for the presentation of all producers in negotiations with all dealers—that is, a farmers' association and a dealers' association—any separate contracts shall not be in the public interest, and therefore are forbidden."

Jeff sighed. "How did they work it?"

"Your question reminds me of the story of the State legislator who always won at poker," Holbridge commented dryly. "It seems he never played with anyone but lobbyists."

"Just like that, huh?" Jeff commented. "Well, tomorrow's another day. Do you think you can block the injunction?"

"The regulation seems to be pretty specific," Holbridge said.

"Do your best," Jeff ordered. "Try to steer it before Judge Harvey if you can."

Kirk was perusing the two-page advertisements he had prepared. "Boy, they should have played the National Anthem when they set these in type," he commented. "Listen to this: 'To the Citizens of Marlborough: In the interests of the public, an interest which should be the first concern of every milk company, in order to avoid bloodshed and industrial strife and to permit the farmers of this area a reasonable profit on their investment—ad infinitum.' Do we use the same one tomorrow?"

Jeff grinned. "No rest for the wicked, Bill. Tomorrow blast the Milk Dealers' Association and the State control board." He explained the new situation. "Don't pull your punches. Bear down on the fact that the big three of the Dealers' Association, which blamed the strike on Clover Valley, voted today to continue opposing the demands of the farmers when it came to a showdown. Give 'em both barrels. Accuse the big three of responsibility for fomenting the demands of the farmers so that they could force the farmers to strike in order to break the farmers and make the association so weak that it would be nothing but a lackey for the milk monopoly."

Kirk blinked. "That's strong stuff. Is it true?"

"How else can you explain it?" Jeff asked. "If Rigsley just wanted to embarrass me by putting the strike blame on me when I got here, they would have dropped the strike issue. They probably figured on killing two birds with one stone. Anyway, if I'm wrong, they'll have a hell of a time convincing the public what we say ain't so!"

"What'll I call the milk board?"

Jeff took a deep breath and sonorously rolled out the answer: "The villainous tool of the monopoly. You better demand a legislative investigation of the board while you're at it. Put the fear of God into 'em."

He picked up the telephone and told the operator to connect him with the sheriff.

"He's still on his vacation, sir," she told him a moment later. "That is, he was taken ill while he was away. Do you wish to speak to Chief Deputy Logan?"

"Put him on," Jeff said.

"What do *you* want?" Logan demanded.

"I want protection for the farmers and truck drivers who are bringing my milk in tonight," Jeff said. "I'm afraid of violence from sections of the Farmers' Association dominated by Burk, who may try to stop us from getting our milk until they settle their arguments with the other dealers."

"You're not making a strike-breaking outfit out of this office while I'm in charge," Logan responded contemptuously.

"I'm not breaking a strike," Jeff said. "I don't have a strike. I want protection from elements which may resort to lawlessness."

"You're not only breaking a strike—you're breaking the law by running that milk in here," Logan snapped. "There's a regulation in effect that outfits in this milk-shed area can't make independent deals."

"You seem to be pretty well posted on the newborn rules of the milk board," Jeff commented. "Who told you about it—Rigsley or Burk?"

"Don't give me any of your lip or I'll send my men out to turn your trucks back," Logan threatened.

"Oh, no, you won't. Not if you're smart, you won't," Jeff said. "You couldn't be elected dog catcher if you did that, and I understand you want to run for sheriff. Also, a milk company has to receive a printed bulletin of a new regulation before it becomes law."

There was a short silence on the other end of the wire. "Oh, yeah? I'll see about that."

"Listen, Logan," Jeff said harshly. "If you won't help me, you keep out of my way or your political life will be dead as of yesterday!"

Smashing the receiver down, he yelled for Bill Kirk. "Buy an extra page of space in the papers tomorrow and print a big picture of Logan with just one line under it—in big type: 'Why Wouldn't Chief Deputy Sheriff Logan Furnish Police Protection To Clover Valley Dairy Farmers and Truckers Last Night When Clover Valley Settled Its Strike and Began Delivery of Vitally Needed Milk to the City?' "

"Wow!" Kirk exclaimed. "You're going to make friends fast around here."

Clark stuck his head in the door. "There's a call for you on another wire. Fella wouldn't state his business."

Jeff returned to the telephone. "Gorman speaking."

A cautious voice answered him. "This is Jack Bada, Mr. Gorman."

"Who?"

"Jack Bada. You know—at the bottle exchange."

"Oh, sure, Jack. Glad to hear from you."

"Does that offer you made me about that airplane mechanic's course still go?" Bada asked.

"You bet. I'll send you to Chicago all expenses paid and give you fifteen dollars a week for your folks if you've got something really good to tell me."

"O. K.," Bada said after a moment's hesitation. "I guess I can trust you to keep a promise. They're going to smash up all the bottles you've got over here tonight. And you've got a raft—must be two hundred gross. They've been piling up for five days."

"Thanks, Jack," Jeff said, his eyes blazing. "When's this party start?"

"Around midnight. They got a lot of tough guys from the South Side over here, and they're going to block off all the roads and doors so nobody can get near to see what's going on inside. They're paying us guys inside fifty dollars apiece to keep our mouths shut. Heller said if anybody blabbed or tried to, we'd all go to jail because we've busted bottles before."

"O. K., Jack, and don't worry, I'll take care of you." Jeff banged down the receiver and yelled for Clark. "Where's Dugan?"

"I'm right here," Matt said, filling the doorway, a big grin on his face. "Baby, we did a job today. I got a truck rollin' in here from seventy-five miles away, and we're going to have plenty of milk." He mopped his brow. "We got more orders for fluid tomorrow than we know what to do with. That damned Heller's been slow getting our bottles over to us. Get after him, will you, Jeff? We're runnin' short."

Jeff grunted. "They're going to bust our bottles up at midnight."

"My Gawd!" Matt exclaimed. "They got a hundred and fifty gross over there; maybe two hundred. That's five or ten thousand dollars' worth of bottles." He took off his hat and threw it against the wall. "Why, that dirty son— What are you gonna do?"

Jeff leaned placidly back in his chair and shrugged. "That's your department," he said.

Matt replied: "We'll collect 'em."

"I'd suggest going over there to collect the bottles. They belong to us, and we have a perfectly legal right to enter the premises for the purpose of collecting them. We're still a member of the bottle exchange."

CHAPTER XI.

LET 'EM HAVE IT.

THE night was pitch dark. There was no moon. On the deserted west side of the Clover Valley Dairy buildings, only the night lights showed. In the court space behind the retail loading docks, the movements of scores of men could be heard. Jeff turned on his flashlight and ran it around in a wide circle, picked up Matt Dugan, and quickly extinguished the beam, calling softly: "All ready, Matt?"

"Yep," Dugan replied, approaching the loading platform. "I got every driver, loader and plant man in the place out here. Listen, boss, you let me handle this. There won't be enough of that bottle exchange left to build a smokehouse out of, and it isn't our bottles that are going to get broke this time."

"Take it easy," Jeff said. "I don't want anybody to get hurt if we can help it."

"That's a big *'if,'* boss," Dugan said. "The last time Clark phoned me, he said they had that place loaded up with about twenty guys—big guys."

Jeff had a momentary qualm. "No lead pipes," he compromised.

"If they get them out, we'll take 'em away from them, and it'll be their fault if they get hurt," Dugan said. "You said you'd let me run my end of the business, and this is my end!"

"I hope not, Matt. It would be an untimely end," Jeff said, adding soberly, "When's Clark going to call again?"

"Any minute now," Matt replied.

Three minutes dragged by, and then the loading-dock phone rang. Jeff answered it. "This is Clark, Mr. Gorman. They just blocked off the roads here. I guess they're ready to start. The police prowl car passed by two minutes ago, and there won't be another along for about twenty-five minutes."

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Let's go, Matt."

"All aboard, boys," Matt called. "Keep your trucks scattered out. We'll go first in the open car."

Jeff climbed in beside Matt.

"I might as well go along and get my head cracked, too," Kirk said.

Matt took the wheel, and four huskies

climbed in beside him. "Party," one of them said.

"You should 'a' come to Marlborough before, Mr. Gorman," a big Swede remarked. "Town's been awful dead lately."

Matt stepped on the gas, four minutes later swinging the car into the street south of the bottle exchange. A man stepped into the glare of the head lamps and held up his hands. Matt stopped the car, and two more men appeared out of the shadows, hanging alongside the car. Kirk nudged Jeff and pointed ahead. At the other end of the street the lights of another car showed.

"That's Devers," Matt muttered. "He made it fast."

One of the hoodlums put his foot on the running board. "Sorry, bud; this street's blocked off. Men workin'."

"Where?" Matt asked.

The other two toughs ranged alongside and the first answered: "What do you care where? Scram."

"Give it to 'em," Matt yelled.

The Swede beside Jeff arose in his seat and swung a sawed-off ball bat, clunking one of the first hoodlums over the head with a dull thud. The guard with his foot on the running board swore and swung his arm back, revealing a lead pipe which he brought down in a smashing blow at Matt's head. One of Matt's drivers dove over the back seat and seized the man's arm, plunging out of the car on top of him. The third man started to run.

"You O. K., Sam?" Matt shouted as a Clover Valley truck pulled up behind them. Sam didn't answer, and the lights

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showed him lying still in the road, blood running from a gash on his forehead. Matt started to get out of the car to tackle the hoodlum.

"We'll get him," a voice yelled from the truck, and three men piled out. Matt reclosed the door and started forward, the car lamps picking up the running figure of the other strong-arm man.

"Raid," the man yelled. "Raid!"

Matt slowed down the car. "Swede, you and Joe shut that bum up." They jumped from the moving car and swept the guard from his feet as Matt bore down on the exchange.

Light from behind them and from the other direction picked up ten men armed with clubs and pipe taking up positions by the loading-platform doors. Matt stopped the car and jumped out.

"Wait a minute, Matt," Jeff yelled.

Matt pulled up. "Wait for what?" he demanded, swinging a wrench in his hand.

"Wait till some more of the boys get here," Jeff said. "They're right behind us."

"Come on, you mugs," Matt hollered. "We ain't got all night."

They swarmed up behind him, armed with baseball bats and wrenches. Matt sailed forward toward the doors of the exchange. "Get the hell out of here if you know what's good for you?" he yelled at the hoodlums lined up on the front of the platforms. A bat sailed through the air and caught one in the shoulder, knocking him off the platform, and he instantly disappeared under three big drivers.

Two bricks and three more bats followed, and the Clover Valley men rushed the platform. The hoodlums started to break for the door behind them. "Come in here," a voice yelled. It was Heller. The men scrambled through the door, but two of them weren't quick enough. The drivers knocked pipes from the men's hands and began punching them back and forth between them like tackling dummies until both slumped unconscious to the floor.

"Open that door, Heller," Matt yelled.

"Go to hell," the reply came back. "You come in here and we'll throw so many milk bottles at you you'll be picking glass out of your skull for the next ten years."

Matt waved at his men. "Smash in the window," he ordered. The first man to smash a window and start through caught a bottle on the head.

"Quit that," Jeff yelled, looking at the nasty gash the bottle had made. "Matt, get that big truck up here."

"Gus, bring up the ten-ton truck," Matt bellowed. "What do you want with it, Cash?"

"Good night," Kirk exclaimed. "You better do something quick—listen to 'em breaking up those bottles in there."

Jeff pointed to a double door on the street level. "What's that?"

"The joint used to be a garage," Matt explained. "Those doors are barred up—they don't use 'em any more."

"O. K.," said Jeff. "Run the trucks through 'em."

Matt whooped and swung aboard the truck himself.

"The neighbors must like this," Kirk commented.

"These are all factories around here —nobody around but watchmen," somebody said.

"Oh, yeah? There's a police siren."

Matt gave the truck the gun and smashed into the doors. There was a splintering smash. One door fell backward a few inches, and light showed through a dozen cracks. Matt backed up and rammed the truck into the double doors again—flattening out the fenders, but crashing the doors open.

"Drive it on in the place," Jeff yelled.

Matt kept right on going, his men climbing on the back of the truck as it went through. Inside, they disgorged themselves from the truck and started after the hoodlums and the exchange workers, who fled toward the offices, throwing their clubs away and holding up their hands.

Jeff followed in the wake of the truck.

"Where's Heller?" he asked.

"Right here," Heller said. A sudden silence fell over the whole group. Heller was standing with his back to the wall near his floor desk, a revolver in his hand.

"Now get the hell out of here or I'll shoot," he declared, his pale-blue eyes hard. "You're trespassing."

"I'm not trespassing," Jeff declared, walking slowly forward. "My company is one of the owners of this exchange, and you are holding property which belongs to me. I came here to collect the Clover Valley bottles."

Heller pointed the automatic at Jeff. "Move another step forward and I'll fire," he threatened.

Jeff laughed. "That's murder, and you'd burn for it. Don't be a fool, Heller. The game isn't worth the electric chair, and you know it. And I know you know it." He continued walking forward.

"Listen, Gorman, I'll wing you if you keep coming," he said tensely.

"That's ten years to life," Jeff said. "Are a few bottles and a lousy job like this worth the years in jail?"

Heller lowered the automatic and shrugged his shoulders. "Take your damned bottles," he said. "But you're going to jail yourself if you do."

Matt waved his arm. "O. K., boys," he said. "Start loading bottles. Gus, you pick up the guys who were hurt and rush 'em over to the hospital."

Kirk sighed. "Well, here comes the law—from all directions."

Jeff looked at Heller, who was grinning widely.

"We found how you boys were gutting Clover Valley," he said quietly. "You making any complaints to the police, or are you standing by the sinking ship?"

Heller wet his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Jeff shrugged. "We've got a swell case making up—criminal conspiracy, fraudulent misrepresentation, bribery, violation of the State corporative finance laws. You're not important. We can deal you in or forget about you. And I keep my word."

Heller eyed Jeff uncertainly. "I think you're a damned liar, and I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not making any charges. You came over to collect some bottles."

Kirk stared at Jeff. "What's all this about having a case against them for criminal conspiracy?" he asked later.

Jeff shook his head. "I wish I knew. It's funny how a guilty conscience will work on a man, isn't it?"

CHAPTER XII.

CASH DEMANDS SHOW-DOWN.

MR. HOLBRIDGE was not in a good humor. "I've wasted the whole morning getting those ten drivers of yours out of jail. Their fines came to seven hundred and twenty dollars, including costs."

Jeff shrugged and winked. "That's

cheap enough for the bottles we rescued. I had to let those boys be hauled in on a charge of disorderly conduct. The cops insisted on arresting somebody when they saw all the cracked heads out there."

"Was anybody seriously hurt?"

Jeff shook his head. "One of those hoodlums got a bad concussion, but I had Kirk slip him a little money and everything's O. K."

"Well, I haven't been able to give any attention to that injunction, and the matter comes up at three o'clock in Judge Murray's court. My office attempted to have it heard by Harvey, but it couldn't be arranged," Holbridge grumbled.

"Skip it," Jeff said unexpectedly. "We've figured out an angle. Let 'em have their injunction."

"What?"

"Certainly. We're going to pay them the old price," Jeff reported, "but we're going to take over the routes of the truckers who bring the milk into the city and put them all on a contract basis. In other words, the farmers don't have to pay anybody to deliver their milk for us. We're paying for it. We pay them the old milk price. They make as much, and, in some cases, more profit than they would under a higher-price scale for milk."

Mr. Holbridge polished his pince-nez with feverish intensity as he considered the legal aspects of this development. "Well, I'll be damned," he said finally, perching his glasses on his nose and inspecting Jeff with an air of satisfaction. "It's perfectly legal."

Kirk dragged wearily into the office. "And I thought newspapermen led a dog's life. The county attorney, I beg to report, is busily postponing, avoiding, procrastinating, and otherwise conducting himself like a weak-kneed county attorney in an attempt to get rid of those six hot truck drivers who testified that you hired them to bring milk into the city. What's the good word?"

Jeff doodled on his blotter for a few moments. "Burk hired them, acting for Rigsley. If they sing, it will discredit Burk so we can't let the issue die. Let's see. Give him the old Logan technique. A full page in every newspaper with a picture of the prosecutor and a big headline: 'Why Aren't the Truck Drivers Who Perjured Themselves Testifying That the Clover Valley Dairy Co. Hired Them to Run Milk Across the State Line Being Prosecuted, Mr. Prosecuting Attorney?' How does that strike you?"

"It strikes me fine, but I don't think the county attorney is going to like it," Kirk commented. "I saw Matt outside. He said to tell you that Burk is getting the other farmers riled up—telling them that if they let Clover Valley keep delivering milk, they'll lose their own strike. Giving them that old 'united-we-stand—divided-we-fall' stuff. He thinks Burk is hiring some strong-arm boys to do a little messing around with our raw-milk-delivery trucks while Deputy Sheriff Logan looks at the beautiful moonlight."

Jeff reached for the telephone. "I'll fix that," he said. "That's easy. Operator, get me the Connelly Detective Bureau in New York."

Jack Connelly himself answered the telephone. "What's itching you now, Cash?" he drawled. "I got four guys working for that assistant of yours out in Ohio—and on the cuff, at that."

Jeff laughed. "Send me the bill. We're temporarily solvent again. And send me sixty big strong men who are

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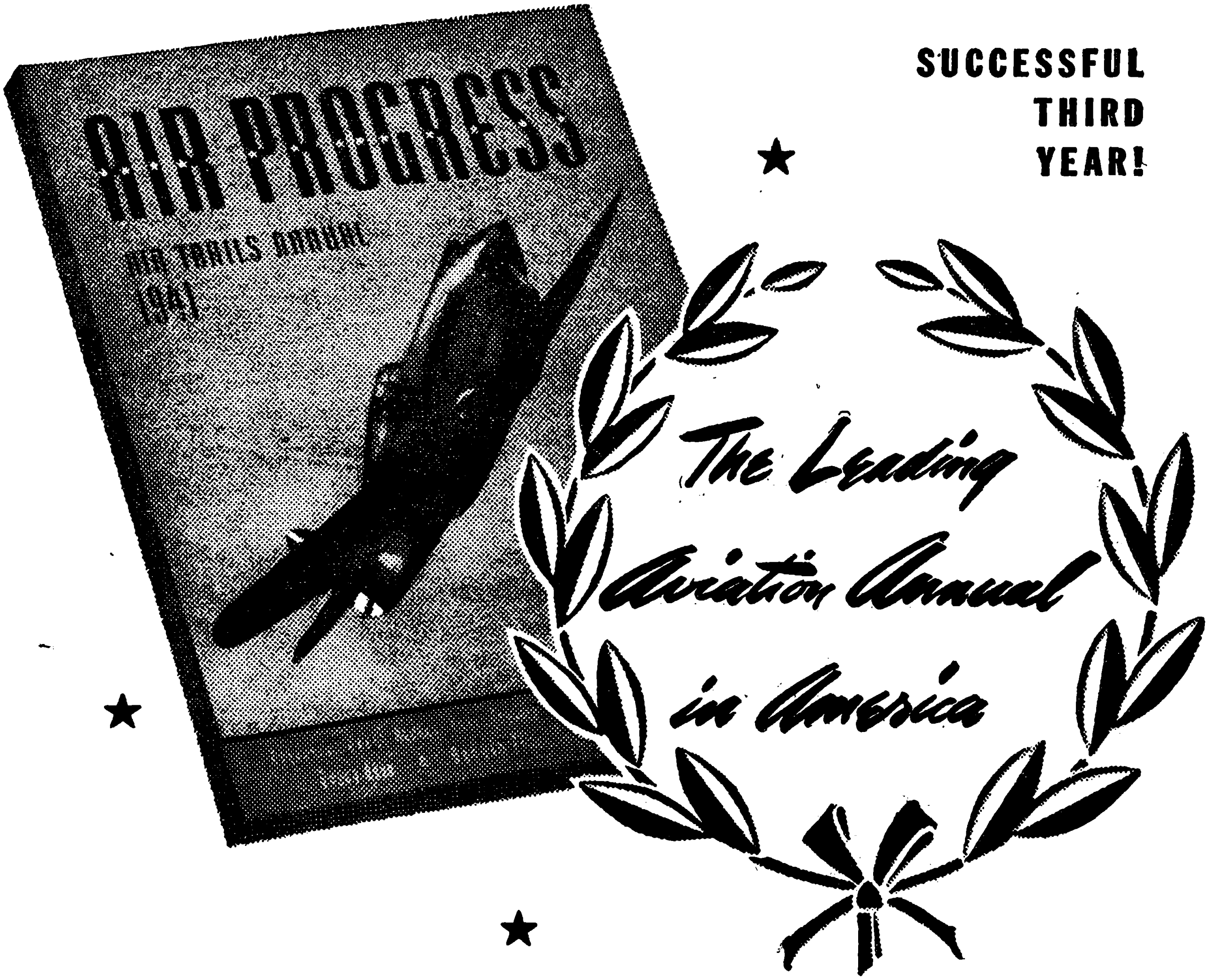

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not afraid of riding around on milk trucks on dark nights."

Mr. Connelly was taken aback. "Oh, you're an industrialist now, huh? O. K. Sixty strike breakers. They'll be there in the morning."

"I don't want strike breakers. I want guards," Jeff remonstrated.

"O. K., O. K., if you want to quibble over language. These finks I'm sending you become guards as of now. I'll even give them uniforms," Connelly said. "If they get jugged for assault, you got to get 'em out. That's in the contract I'm sending you."

Jeff replaced the telephone gently. "There are times when I feel as meek and gentle as a lamb, and such occasions always occur after talking with Mr. Connelly," he said. "Tell Matt I don't think we'll have to worry about our milk routes, but our hospital bills may be terrific."

Even Matt Dugan was shocked when Connelly's army reported the next morning. "Are those guys going to ride our country routes?" he asked. Jeff assured him they were.

"I don't know whether it's safe," Dugan remonstrated. "They might scare the cows to death."

Jeff raised his eyebrows. "You have something there, I think. Hey, Kirk, get a photographer up here and take a picture of our private army. Buy a page in all the papers and fill it with the picture. We ought to save a lot of rioting that way."

Mr. Kirk inspected the Connelly guards. "A lot of rioting? We won't have any. Now I understand the preparedness program."

Three days later, Jeff, a worried frown on his face, said: "I don't like this. Rigsley isn't doing anything."

"They're breaking bottles on doorsteps at night," Matt Dugan said. "It's running up. We'll have to have more bottles. Outside of that, we're selling every quart of milk we can get. And every pound of butter."

Jeff shook his head. "I don't like that new law that if we have liquid milk we can't refuse to sell it. They're up to something."

He turned wearily to Holbridge. "How are the accountants making out?"

"Hanson was short, but it's hard to tell whether the shortage will run to important figures. He did a wonderful job of it."

Six days later Jeff stormed into the office for the morning conference of his board, rasping.

"Rigsley's been making a sucker out of me. While they sit there and let their strike drag on, we've been taking on every farmer who's deserted Burk, paying him a big price for his milk, even if only on a temporary basis, and expanding so much we've had to buy carloads of bottles. Even since we asked people to leave their bottles indoors, we're getting plenty of breakage, and we're going to be left with a bottle inventory that'll knock us for a loop. How many more farmers deserted Burk yesterday?"

"Twenty-five," Matt Dugan reported.

"Twenty-five guys we have to buy milk from. They're going to sink us by just sitting quiet."

"Yeah. But think of the business we'll have when this is over," Dugan said, pointing to a sales chart. "Look at that, Cash."

"Up every day, and every quart of milk we sell costing us money."

"That's not so good," Kirk commented. "Rigsley issued a statement this morning saying that as long as the essential requirements of the city were being met by Clover Valley, the Dealers' Association was content with the present situation until the farmers agreed to a reasonable price basis. I suppose that means that Burk won't get reasonable until we go broke."

Jeff, his face haggard, his eyes like burned holes in a blanket, paced irritably up and down the room.

"I don't give a damn what they do," he told Holbridge as the lawyer observed him sympathetically. "They aren't going to lick us now." He turned to Kirk. "Get on your horse, boy, I've a real story for you. We're ready to put paper into this town."

Kirk looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Paper bottles," Jeff said sharply. "Paper containers for milk."

Holbridge shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jeff, but there's a regulation in force, by the State milk control board, of course, that milk sold in paper containers must be sold at a price one cent higher per container than milk sold in glass bottles. The glass people put that one over."

"As far as I'm concerned, that's swell," Jeff said. "We need that extra profit. People will have to take the milk in paper containers from the stores. We won't give 'em anything else in stores. We'll use only our bottles on home delivery. We'll blame the extra price for paper on the milk board. That'll help us over the hump for a time, anyway."

"We'll lose a small fortune every day," Kirk said.

"Not only that, but if we put a paper unit in now, we'll be stuck with it when the strike is over. We can't compete at a penny higher price," Dugan protested.

"There's nothing to prevent our buying the paper back for waste at a penny per container for those who won't pay more—or two pennies if we want to cut the price," Jeff pointed out.

This was received with elation. "Yeah, but it'll take 'em a month to put in a paper unit," Dugan said mournfully.

"We've got a paper unit in the next block—ready for service in twenty-four hours," Jeff said. "That's where I got our bank roll—from the paper people. They went right to work installing a unit for us. The only trouble is, we're going to need more money again soon if we don't get a break." He looked at Holbridge irritably. "Haven't those damned accountants found anything yet?"

"It looks like the sums will be fairly large, they think," he said. "They can't tell how much, though."

"Who cares?" Jeff asked. "It's enough that he was stealing. I want all of Hanson's private papers, bank account, canceled checks, everything. Go to court if you have to and get an order."

"But the family—after all," said Holbridge.

Jeff nodded. "You're right. Go to the family first. Tell 'em to turn the stuff over to us if they want to avoid a scandal. We won't make anything public that isn't necessary, whatever we do. It won't be as bad as our having to make formal charges now."

"Where's your assistant, Mr. Ranger?" Greta Wagner asked.

Jeff's good humor evaporated. "All I've had from him since he left are three telegrams asking for five hundred dollars each time."

Bill Kirk's eyebrows shot up an inch. "Wouldn't you like me to go away some place for you?"

Jeff didn't even try to smile. "See if you can locate him on the phone—here's his address."

JIMMY was greatly aggrieved at Jeff's attitude. "I was just getting ready to leave. I've got the goods on him. Affidavits, court testimony in a civil trial. Quotes from former and co-operative officials here—everything. He chiseled into this co-operative-marketing association here, got control, incited an unnecessary strike and generally put them so far behind the eight ball—financially and otherwise—that it's taken them six years to get out. Before they gave him the heave they proved that he was a company stooge—Rigsley's outfit, Continental Dairies."

"We'll spread that when Jimmy gets to town," Jeff told Kirk the next morning. "Give it the works—take two pages."

"You don't need to take any pages—this is news," Kirk complained. "You don't have to buy advertising space to tell a yarn like this."

"Buy it anyway," Jeff told him. "We can use bigger print and say just what we want to that way. We get news stories and advertising both. Nobody can miss it."

Holbridge rushed into the room, startling them both. They'd never seen him proceed at anything but a leisurely and dignified gait.

"We have them," he shouted. "*Everything! I got it from Hanson's records.* Canceled checks. Everything! Hanson was milking this company and paying Burk to control the farmers' association—financing all Burk's activities—out of Clover Valley funds. He milked the company dry. Rigsley's signature is on several of the checks, and some are made out to him from Hanson's account. Rigsley must have been planning to get control of the company personally, with its own money. This will break the strike—the other companies will all throw in with us—the smaller ones, anyway."

Jeff took the folders of checks and memorandums from Holbridge, saying: "Sit down, Mr. Holbridge. Great work, but take it easy." He examined the papers. "This is the stuff."

"Let me at it," Kirk said.

Jeff shook his head. "Take care of Ranger's dope when he comes—one shot at a time."

"But this is hot," Kirk protested.

"I've got a use for this," Jeff said.

He picked up the telephone and had the operator connect him with Burk.

"So you finally smartened up, huh?" Burk greeted him. "I thought you'd come runnin' to me pretty quick when you found out we knew what we were doing."

"You're wrong, Burk," Jeff said flatly. "We've got you. We have all Hanson's records." Jeff expanded a little on what was actually on hand. "Books, canceled checks, letters, memorandums and a diary. He kept everything. What he didn't keep he made photographs of—"

There was a startled silence over the wire.

"I . . . I don't know what you're talking about," Burk said finally.

"You know what I'm talking about," *Jeff said. "I'm putting that stuff right* in the safe. If you and Rigsley haven't made complete restitution to this company by tomorrow at this hour for every cent stolen, the whole record goes to the State attorney general. And he's honest. You can't touch him."

Burk blubbered incoherently. Jeff shook a disgusted head. "He's got a streak up his back a yard wide—Ruthless Roy when he's got all the cards and Piker Pete when they go against him," he said to Kirk and Holbridge. Into the phone he spoke again to Burk. "Listen, you, get it up or take your medicine. And I want this strike called off immediately—it's costing us money. Also, I want that tariff lifted off paper containers by the State milk board. Tell Rigsley."

"You're not going to let them get away with this?" Holbridge demanded indignantly. "Those men have violated the law."

"Of course I'm not," Jeff snapped. "But I want to get our money back and this company situation straightened out first."

"You mean you'll cross them up?" Holbridge asked. It was apparent his ethics were outraged.

"If I gave you my word, I'd keep it," Jeff said. "But why should I keep it with a crook. He'd stab me in the back first chance out of the box."

Kirk said: "Whew, live and learn. Why didn't you call Rigsley yourself."

Jeff grunted. "Panic is contagious. By the time Burk gets through telling Rigsley what we have, it'll sound like the electric chair."

JEFF, Jimmy, Kirk, and Greta Wagner were playing at bridge that night at Jeff's hotel suite as they awaited word from Rigsley and Burk, with Matt Dugan kibitzing, when the telephone rang. Jeff sprang for it as though released from a spring.

"Mr. Gorman?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Speaking."

"I just thought you might want to know—Burk is headed some place with a sackful of dynamite. Your office."

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The receiver at the other end of the wire clicked.

"Hello," Jeff shouted. "Hello! My God!"

CHAPTER XIII.

COSTLY THREAT EXPLODES.

GRETA WAGNER, her hands unconsciously clenched from mingled fear and tension, leaned forward in the seat, peering at the road ahead of them. "Drive faster, Matt," she pleaded.

"This is all she'll do, Greta," he said, taking the last corner on two wheels and straightening the careening car out upon the street that led directly to the plant gate.

Matt's foot pressed down on the brake pedal as they swung toward the gate. "Get ready to jump, boys."

Suddenly there was a terrific explosion ahead of them. The whole office wing of the building seemed to burst apart. Fingers of orange flame shot skyward.

Debris rained around the car.

Matt Dugan flung open the door and started forward. Jeff grabbed his arm.

"Let me go," Matt yelled. "Old Mike—the watchman—he eats his lunch in there this time of night."

"Maybe he's on the plant side," Jeff said, holding Matt with strength that surprised Greta Wagner.

"No. He lives by the clock." Matt broke away.

Jeff brought him down with a flying tackle. "Don't be a fool," he panted. "That place is an inferno. Nobody could be alive after a blast like that, anyway. And there may be another explosion.'

Matt shook his head. "O. K.," he said, looking at the blazing flames. "I guess you're right."

Old Mike's body was found three hours later by firemen and police. At dawn, officers began sorting for evidence, picking up stray papers, mostly charred, that had been blown free in the explosion. These the police chief brought to Jeff for identification, and among them he found a piece of a check made out by Hanson to Burk, with Rigsley's and Burk's indorsement on the back. Silently he handed it to Jimmy.

"Photostat?" Jimmy asked, handling it delicately.

Jeff nodded. "All we've got left, I guess. Maybe we can use it."

Clark called him. "You're wanted on the phone over on the plant side."

It was Kirk. "I'm still with him."

"With whom?"

"Burk—who do you think? You told me to follow him, didn't you?"

"Stout fella," said Jeff. "Where are you?"

"At the R. & O. station. He's disguised. Vandyke and a doctor's bag. He must have had the dynamite in that. And he's drunk. He bought a ticket for New York. He slipped right out the gate when you people went forward toward the fire. He began drinking when he heard the watchman was murdered. Came over the radio. Stopped in for one, and then when he heard that he took a couple of stiff ones, and it knocked him sodden."

"Stay with him," Jeff said. "And wait a minute." He doodled on a piece of paper with his pencil for a minute, drawing strange triangular figures. Finally he sketched a caricature of Phineas T. Gardiner. "I'll send Jimmy down to take over. Don't turn him over to the cops."

"What's up?"

"We're going to let him go to New

York," Jeff said. "Is his disguise good?"

"Swell," Kirk said. "If I had been covering farm-labor stuff for years and known him very well, I wouldn't have recognized him."

Jeff looked thoughtfully at the ceiling for a few minutes. "Well, we've lost our evidence, but the war is still going on," he said finally to Ranger. "Come on, Jimmy."

In their hotel room, Jeff rooted around in his luggage, finally coming up with something that looked like a rabbit's tail.

"Remember this?" he asked.

"That phony mustache you wore to the masquerade at Drake's house in Miami? I'll never forget."

"No, I don't think you ever will," Jeff said. "Put it on."

"Me?"

"You."

"What for?"

"Well, you made such a fine detective in Ohio—not to mention your training in Denver—that you are hereby appointed the 'Shadow.' Put on the mouse over your upper lip and trail Burk to New York. Keep us informed as to where you and our friend are every three hours when possible. Kirk is down at the station now—R. & O. He'll point out your quarry. And tell him to come up here."

Jeff was consuming a glass of buttermilk when Kirk arrived. "You know, I'm going to be flat if this company folds, and it looks like it's going to fold just when we're on the verge of winning. All on account of lack of dough."

Kirk looked sympathetic. "Ain't it hell?"

"However, if I could throw a good scare into Phineas T. Gardiner, I might get some out of him. For instance, if that same man who called up before—I'd never recognize his voice—were to call up, or if anyone were to call up that I didn't recognize, and say 'Burk blames all his woes on Gardiner—he's going to New York to shoot him'—well, sir, something like that might help. I'd have to tell the police. And, of course, the newspapers would find out about it."

Kirk considered this. "If you put a handkerchief over a telephone, I understand it disguises your voice."

"So I understand," said Jeff.

"Well, I'll see you later, Cash."

Five minutes later, a strange voice told Jeff over the telephone, "Burk is going to New York to kill Phineas Gardiner."

CHAPTER XIV.

PHINEAS IN THE BAG.

MR. PHINEAS T. GARDINER customarily awoke to the soft chime of an electric time piece at precisely 7:45 a. m., whereupon Thomas, his butler, entered upon the last chime and presented him with a cup of coffee. This schedule was timed to perfection to enable Phineas to proceed with leisure from his Park Avenue apartment to his office via limousine, well fed and well barbered.

It was only seven o'clock sharp, however, when Thomas timorously opened the door and entered the room. Mr. Gardiner was snoring and rasping happily away, his head cushioned in the crook of his arm and an expression on his face which came as near to being pleasant as was possible for him, even when asleep. After a moment of hesitation, Thomas took his courage in both hands and cleared his throat: "Ahem!"

Mr. Gardiner sat bolt upright in bed.

Thomas quailed. "I'm . . . I'm sorry to disturb you—"

Mr. Gardiner looked at the wall clock. He stared at Thomas in amazement. His neck began to swell.

"What's the meaning of this, Thomas," he bellowed. "Seven o'clock! I . . . I'm speechless. Explain yourself!"

Thomas seemed on the verge of tears. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gardiner," he said, "but the gentlemen insisted on seeing you."

"What gentlemen?" demanded Mr. Gardiner. "Throw 'em out. What do you mean by disturbing me in the middle of the night?"

Thomas took a deep breath. "The gentlemen are from the police, sir. They insist upon seeing you immediately."

Gardiner blinked. "The police? Well, what the devil do they want? Tell 'em to see me at my office. Never heard of such a thing."

Thomas produced the morning *Herald Post* from behind his back as if by magic and tentatively extended it to his employer, saying: "Possibly it has something to do with this, sir."

Gardiner grabbed the paper from his butler's hand and opened it with a snap that almost rent it in two. His face blanched. "My God!" he said weakly. "My goodness! Thomas—my coffee. Put a shot of brandy in it. No, just bring me the brandy."

"But your doctor—" Thomas remonstrated.

"To hell with my doctor!" shouted Phineas. "Get me some brandy. Send the police up. Get Thomas Jefferson Gorman on the telephone in Marlborough—Green Palace Hotel. He's going to be the death of me. Why did I ever have anything to do with him—"

With a dazed expression, Phineas T. returned his eyes to the paper, reading the glaring headlines which surmounted a picture of himself.

FARM LEADER THREATENS
LIFE OF P. T. GARDINER

Armed Fugitive, Wanted for Bombing Milk Plant, Blames Wall Streeter For Breaking Up Farmers' Co-operative

Eludes Police Vowing, "I'll Shoot Him Dead." Thought To Be In New York

Thomas entered, followed by two plain-clothes men.

"Is this true?" Gardiner demanded, waving the paper.

"I'm sorry to say that it is, Mr. Gardiner," the detective said, introducing himself and his companion. "A nation-wide alarm has been sent out for this man, George Burk. He's believed to be headed for New York, and the commissioner has appointed us to act as your bodyguards."

"That's splendid, gentlemen," Phineas said. "Splendid. Thank you."

Thomas spoke up. "I have Mr. Gorman on the wire, sir."

"You'll excuse me, gentlemen," Phineas said, picking up the telephone. "If you'll just post yourselves outside the door— Hello, Cash."

"Hello, P. T.," Cash answered in an abnormally cheerful voice. "What's on your mind?"

"Don't try to be funny; I'm in no mood for it," Gardiner rasped. "What's this all about? Where is that man? Have they caught him? What have you been doing, anyway? Getting me into a thing like this. I don't even know the man. Never heard of him."

"What man?" Jeff asked.

"Burk," Gardiner shouted. "George Burk. He's trying to kill me."

"What?" Jeff's voice was excited. "Is he there? Hold him. Stall him until I can get the police. We want him out here. He murdered a man."

"Oh-h-h," said Mr. Gardiner. Recovering himself, he added: "He isn't here. He's coming here. It's in the paper. The police sent bodyguards. What have you been doing?"

"Aw, nuts!" Jeff said, his voice poignant with disappointment. "I thought you had him there."

"But he's threatened to kill me."

"Don't worry too much about it. He threatened my life, too, and I am still kicking," Jeff said casually. "I meant to call you about that, but I didn't want to disturb you before eight o'clock. Didn't have any idea it would be carried in the New York papers."

Gardiner's temper welled up through his first shock. "What the hell have you been doing?" he demanded. "What do you mean by getting me into such a situation. All this publicity about breaking up farm co-operatives. People will be calling me the Wolf of Wall Street or something. I'm not going to take it, understand? I'll give the press a statement explaining I haven't anything to do with it. This is all your fault, and I haven't anything to do with it. I'll tell them exactly what happened."

"Exactly what happened?" Jeff questioned sweetly. "Are you going to tell them you foxed me into this mess?"

Gardiner recovered himself. "Now look, Cash—this is serious. You'll have to do something."

Jeff laughed. "Don't get all hot and bothered about it. We've been going through this for days. Riots, bombings, murders, strikes. Get out of town for a few days. The police may be able to catch up with Burk."

"Where can I go?"

"Why don't you come out here? Fly out. He's coming to New York. Marlborough would be the last place he'd look for you."

Gardiner hesitated, then snapped. "I'll do it. Can you keep my visit out of the papers?"

"I'll try," Jeff assured him.

"What can we do to straighten this out," Gardiner asked. "This is a terrible situation."

"Well, you could have saved yourself from it by raising me that hundred thousand dollars when I sent you an S O S," Jeff said. "I can still settle this thing so Burk will cool off and make us all a lot of money if you'll just back me up."

"I'll be there on the first plane," Gardiner said. "Mind you, I'm not promising anything. All I want is to avoid this madman, Burk, until I can find out—"

"O. K.," Jeff cut in. "I'll be at the airport."

CHAPTER XV.

STOOGE FOR PAYOFF.

AS the plane on which Phineas Gardiner was a passenger eased up the runway to the air-terminal building at Marlborough, a squad of city motorcycle police shot out on the field and circled the sky liner, forming a protective cordon around it.

Two State police and four deputy sheriffs hurried forward to take up their places on each side of the door as Gardiner nervously descended. Jeff clasped his hand briefly and muttered. "Come on, Phineas; we have you well protected, but we can't take any chances. Hurry!"

"Where are we going?" Phineas asked, looking about apprehensively as the police officers formed a circle about him and Jeff, his hand on Gardiner's arm, rushed him toward a waiting car. "Haven't they caught that man yet?"

"No. No trace of him," Jeff said. He pushed Gardiner into the automobile and a deputy sheriff climbed in with them, his gun in his hand. Another deputy took his place by the driver. The car zoomed off immediately. Ahead of them, one of Sheriff Baker's riot cars cleared the way with screaming siren. Behind them, another big squad car fell into place. A motorcycle policeman paced the car on each side.

Gardiner took a grip on himself. "Explain this situation immediately, Gorman. This is the most outrageous thing that has ever happened to me. I want to tell you, young man—"

Jeff put a restraining hand on his arm and shook his head, indicating the presence of the deputies. "This is no place to talk. Wait till we get to the bank."

Gardiner stiffened visibly. Mention of banks made him feel at home. He understood banks. Instantly he become suspicious. "What are we going to a bank for?" he demanded. "What bank?"

"The First Standard Bank," Jeff said. "Howard Snyder is the president. He's one of our directors. I thought it would be safer to hold the meeting there."

Gardiner's suspicions intensified. Jeff almost saw him clutching his wallet.

"You told me to straighten this thing out, and I immediately jumped into action," Jeff said. "I have everyone coming who is in a position to effect a peaceful and profitable settlement in this thing."

Gardiner scowled. "Well, I want to see it settled. I can't be running around with an army dodging lunatics; but, mind you, I'm not financing any of your wild schemes."

Jeff shrugged. "Have it your way," he said. "This wasn't my wild scheme—it was yours. You just talked me into it, and now I'm going to try to talk you out of it."

With wailing sirens, the impressive armored cavalcade pulled up at the portals of the First Standard Bank. Police and deputies appeared as if by magic from all sides, forming a lane to the doorway and holding back the spectators. Jeff jumped from the car, grasped Gardiner's arm and rushed him into the protecting marble halls.

Jeff breathed a deep sigh of relief. "I'm glad we made it," he said. "I didn't want to tell you out at the airport, but I heard that news of your coming leaked out some way—possibly because we had to ask for a police detail—and I understand there's a farmer's army marching on the city."

Gardiner's complacency, which had returned with his entry to familiar surroundings, vanished. "What for?"

"Well, you see, they figure our company was responsible for this milk strike," Jeff said, leading him to a private corner of the executives' section and signaling to Mr. Snyder that he wished a moment alone with the *Great Man*. "Of course, that's true. That was the situation you dumped me into."

Gardiner protested volubly.

Jeff cut him short irritably. "Don't you remember that cute little telegram you sent me when I landed in jail the day I got here because I ran into a milk strike and got blamed for inciting a riot? Well, you're just another victim."

Gardiner sank down into a chair. "What do these farmers want?" he asked plaintively.

"I don't know, but I think they intend violence upon your person. You see, when you refused to send me the money I asked for to put the company on its feet peacefully, I had to resort to whatever means I could to keep Clover Valley afloat. That meant breaking the milk strike. Well, I broke it. And in order to break it, I had to break up the Dairy Farmers' Co-operative Marketing Association. That was George Burk's outfit. Well, naturally, Burk was very influential among the farmers and a few heads got broken in the course of events because Burk didn't take all this lying down."

Gardiner grunted. "You don't have to tell me that."

"Finally, Burk, with his life's work crumbling around him and his reputation being shot to threads—" Jeff paused and looked out the window with a nervous frown as if expecting at any moment to see a farmers' army storm the First Standard Bank.

"What are you looking at?" Gardiner demanded.

"Thought I saw a riot heading up," Jeff said. "Just another squad of deputies coming down on patrol."

Gardiner stared at him mutely for a moment and then asked in a weak voice: "What did you do to this man Burk's reputation?"

Jeff hesitated: "Well, you know how it is, P. T. I was licked if I couldn't break up his organization, so naturally I—well, arranged a few little matters; saw the authorities—you know, found out he was violating the law and put the prosecutor and the sheriff on the right track."

Gardiner put a weary hand to his face. "You mean you framed him?" he asked. "No wonder he's gone berserk. Probably a fine, upstanding farmer. You ruin him, break up his organization, and then want to send him to jail on some trumped-up charge." Gardiner's face flushed in the old familiar style for the first time since he had read the papers that morning. "Why, compared to you, I'm a saint, a paragon of all the virtues. You're nothing but . . . ah . . . . a gangster."

Jeff adopted a brusque tone. "Stop crying, P. T.! We're all in the same boat. As you told me, it's sink or swim. Personally, I like to swim. And it isn't going to cost you a nickel."

Gardiner brightened. "No? How's that."

Jeff rubbed his hands judiciously. "Well, you see, they're pretty anxious to get their milk market settled around here," he said. "The milk companies as well as the farmers. You see, it was necessary for me to break up the milk dealers' association, too."

Gardiner was beyond speech. He made a feeble motion with his hands.

"Then, too, there's been all the court costs I've put the other companies to, and that runs up. They're pretty sick of it. And I cut prices and introduced paper containers. You know how that is. Unsettling. Nobody seems to be able to make any money. Marlborough has become a regular dog fight as regards milk."

Gardiner followed Jeff closely as he elaborated upon this theme. Finally he brightened. "Um-m-m," he declared. "Looks like you might have an advantageous position here. What are you going to try to do?"

"Get us both out of the bag," Jeff said.

"Will Burk be satisfied, do you think, if these differences can be composed and order restored to the market?" Phineas asked.

Jeff nodded his head positively. "P. T., if we come out of this conference with everything settled, you won't have to worry about Burk. I guarantee it. Now all you have to do is sit there and agree with me, no matter what I say. You see, you won't have to spend money—the simple fact that you are Phineas T. Gardiner and that you are here will be sufficient to give me the club I need."

Gardiner pondered this. "You mean my presence lends tacit support to your position, as they will conclude that I am, if necessary, ready to come to the aid of the company?"

Jeff nodded. "That's right."

A cautious expression came over Phineas' face. He foresaw treacherous pitfalls in such a position. Observing his expression, Jeff leaped to the window in alarm.

"What's the matter?" Gardiner cried.

"Nothing," Jeff said. He caught Lem Clark's eye and winked. Lem immediately ran for the door of the bank, entering breathlessly to grasp Jeff by the arm and whisper excitedly to him.

"What's up, Cash?" Gardiner demanded. "Come, now, you must be frank with me. After all, I . . . my position here is very—"

Jeff nodded. "Certainly, P. T. I just didn't want to worry you. Nothing important. A few truck loads of farmers were coming into town, but nothing serious happened. Everything is under control. Now about this meeting—"

Gardiner brought himself back to his original thought on this subject. "Yes, about the meeting. I want to ask you some questions—"

Jeff looked toward Snyder's desk. "Well, they are all ready for us. Everybody's here. Come on, Phineas—if we're going to get this thing settled today, we'll have to go in."

"But wait a minute," Gardiner protested. "I've got some questions—"

CHAPTER XVI.

WHITE LIQUID GOLD.

SNYDER presided over the conference as chairman, and Phineas Gardiner was placed at the foot of the conference table, flanked respectfully by Jeff, on his right, and Matt Dugan on his left. Greta Wagner sat beside Mr. Snyder, and Hiram Lee and Malcolm Rigsley seated themselves opposite each other. Holbridge and the attorney for Rigsley and Lee completed the group.

Phineas Gardiner received his first shock when Jeff, at the invitation of Mr. Snyder, arose to explain the purpose of the meeting.

"Gentlemen, there is no necessity for my going into the circumstances which have led up to this meeting," he began. "We all fully realize the disorganized state into which the milk market in Marlborough has sunk. Price cutting, route stealing, innumerable suits which have enriched the legal profession but have proved a burden to ourselves, the necessity of having guards ride delivery wagons and trucks, protective measures for our various farmers to shield them against violence and the outright difficulties among the farmers and various companies all have contributed to a state of chaos. This was not of my choosing, but it is a fact, and one which I feel strongly we should face and eliminate. It can be done, and I have a solution to offer." Jeff paused and looked about the room confidently. "Our company is ready to arrange a peace. The terms, we are confident, will be profitable to all."

Mr. Gardiner looked positively cheerful as he saw the interest with which this declaration was received. At the next words he received one of the most painful shocks of his career.

"It is not necessary, of course, for me to inform you that Mr. Phineas T. Gardiner has almost unlimited capital at his disposal," Jeff said. "If we should be forced to do so, we will spend a million dollars in this market continuing this fight. It is needless to say that the milk industry would be ruined for years to come for those who were unable to keep up the pace."

Rigsley leaped to his feet angrily: "This is nothing but blackmail in a legal form," he declared. "And you won't get away with it. Don't forget that Marlborough Milk has the complete resources of Continental Dairies behind it, Gorman. And Great Meadow Milk also has a national organization behind it. We can spend as many millions as we find necessary."

Jeff smiled. "Possibly so, Mr. Rigsley, but have you given proper consideration to the fact that your companies are in business purely to make a profit. They would not be interested in a long-drawn-out fight for the control of this market. It would not be good business. On the other hand, this matter, due to the course which it has taken, has become somewhat personal with us. Mr. Gardiner, as you probably know, is not any longer engaging in his various activities for the sake of profit. To him they are more in the nature of a financial game. And this game has gripped his attention because he feels there has been almost what one might term a conspiracy afoot to defeat him. He therefore is prepared to tilt the pot to any limit." Jeff turned respectfully to the great gambler. "Am I not interpreting your attitude correctly, Mr. Gardiner?"

"Umph," said Phineas T., a man to whom only one hundred and one cents was more sacred than a dollar. His complexion had taken on a slightly greenish hue.

"What is your proposition, Mr. Gorman?" Hiram Lee asked dryly.

"It's really quite simple," Jeff said. He beamed happily upon Mr. Lee, attempting his best to look like Santa Claus bringing joy to the milk industry in general and Mr. Lee in particular. "We propose a merger between your own Great Meadow Dairy and the Clover Valley Dairy Co., Inc."

Rigsley smashed his fist on the table, enraged at this proposal, not only on personal grounds, but because he realized that such a merger would shove his company into a secondary position which his parent organization would not approve. "I object strenuously to any such proposition—"

Hiram Lee leaned forward and pointed his finger into Rigsley's face, surprising him into silence. "Just a minute, Mr. Rigsley," he said. "Who's being propositioned here—you or me?"

"I warn you, Lee—" Rigsley began.

"Don't you warn me about anything, Rigsley," Lee snapped. "And don't make any threats you can't carry out. I've learned a few new tricks to add on to a considerable store of old ones since Mr. Gorman came to the city, and with his organization to support me, I don't doubt but what I could more than adequately take care of myself. What's on your mind, Gorman?"

"Simply this," Jeff declared. "A merger on an equal basis; equitable adjustment being made in your favor for the current deficits and outstanding indebtedness of the Clover Valley Co. *in your favor* in preferred stock with one common share in each company to be equal to two in the new company, and voting power resting in the common."

Hiram Lee was a man who made up his mind in a hurry. "That's agreeable with me, providing we can reach an equitable adjustment regarding your company's claims outstanding, except for one thing: The manner in which the common stock is to be distributed would leave me without complete control. I must have fifty-one percent. Also, it would be specified that I was to be president and chairman of the board."

"That's satisfactory," Jeff said, "on certain conditions on our part. Miss Wagner must be your director of consumer relations. Mr. Kirk is to be installed as advertising manager. Mr. Dugan is to have a position commensurate with his abilities."

"Splendid," Lee said. "But how about that voting stock?"

"The balance would be placed in your favor by having Mr. Rigsley assign five percent of his stock to you and ten percent to the Farmers' Co-operative when it is reorganized. For one dollar!"

Rigsley jumped to his feet, livid. "Do you think I'm crazy?" he asked. "I refuse to have anything more to do with this."

Jeff took the folded photostatic copy of the burned record from his pocket and shoved it at him. Rigsley's face blanched. Finally he spoke. "I . . . I withdraw my objections. I see that for the good of the public and the industry, this would be an excellent move all around."

Everybody relaxed, even Rigsley. The long battle was over, and Clover Valley stood triumphant on a milk-soaked field.

A bank attendant came in and handed Cash a telephone.

Jeff grinned as he spoke into it: "Hello, Mr. Hill. I'm sorry I didn't recall you at first. I have a very clear picture of you in my mind. I've always wanted to cultivate a mustache like yours and have never been able to do it."

"Mr. Hill, hell!" Jimmy Ranger, on the New York end of the wire, exploded. "I almost set the phony hay afire ten minutes ago lighting a cigarette. I've got Burk tabbed. Here's where he is—"

As Jimmy went on, Jeff noticed Matt Dugan perking his ears at Jeff's mention of a mustache. Jeff nodded almost imperceptibly to Matt as he hung up. Doodling idly, he wrote in between the strange figures—"Lincoln Rogers, 504 Hepworth Apartments, N. Y." Irritably he pushed the paper, and it flew across the table to Matt.

"I'm sorry, Dugan," he said apologetically.

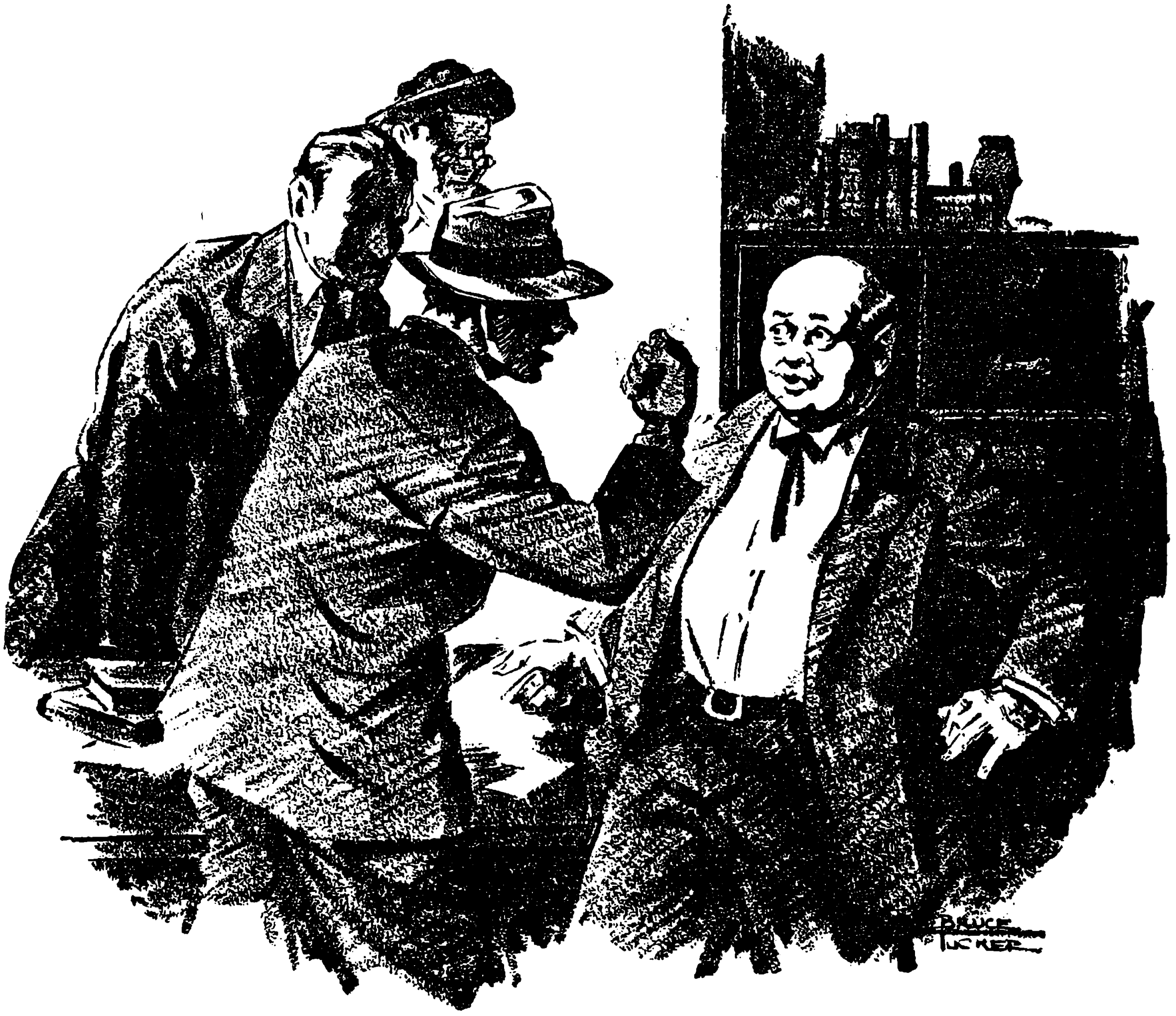
"That's O. K.," Matt replied. He bent down and examined the paper without anyone noticing it. Then Matt excused himself and left to phone the information to the sheriff as the meeting broke up in an aura of good feeling.

"Listen, Cash," Phineas said, tugging at Jeff's sleeve. "How about that man Burk? Nothing was said of him."

"Oh, him," Jeff said. "Why, I just heard he was captured in New York, Phineas." He patted him on the back. "You certainly have been a friend in need. I won't forget it."

Gardiner sank into a chair wearily. "You know, I think you used me, Jeff. *Is* there a man named Burk?"

THE END.



DOUBLE SHUFFLE

BY JESS CARVER

● Colonel Goobey could sense a killing in Cider Creek; and his particular quarry was Culpepper Twig.

MR. OBIE OBER, motorman and conductor of the celebrated "All Aboard" column of the Pittsburgh *Daily Herald,* bounced as only Obie Ober could bounce into the office of Hankus Martin, the rag's managing editor.

"Hank!" roared Obie. "I really got me a yarn. Boy, what a yarn!"

Editor Martin was signally unimpressed. "Th' hell you have," he retorted. "If so, it's news." He ripped a pencil viciously through a sheet of copy. "You haven't had a yarn in that tripe of yours since eggs were cheap. As a matter of fact, Obie," he went on, eying his columnist morosely, "I been speculating about you. I been figuring on putting you back writing obits an' covering the laidies' aid circuit."

His enthusiasm dimmed not a wit by his editor's lack of interest, Obie plopped into a chair and lighted a cigarette.

"Always kidding, ain't you, chief?" he chuckled. "Always kiddin'. Let me tell you about this yarn. It's a wowser. I got it from a traveling salesman. He makes a jerk burg named Cider Greek—you know the place, down in the eastern part of the State. Well, seems there's a hayshaker there named—an' get this, Hank—named *Culpepper Twig.* All this dope has done is parlay twenty goats into about twelve thousand bucks. Imagine that! Seems he peddled the goats to the town banker and big shot, ol' Senator Delcimus Flick, for about six hundred fish, and then took an option on a factory with that dough, ran a hundred bucks more into five grand bettin' on the hosses, and winds up with a pot full of cash and ol' Flick's goat, which makes twenty-one goats in all. He keeps the dough hid under his mattress, they tell me, and all he does is put in his time shootin' pool and sitting out in front of a poolroom watching the gals go by."

The managing editor grunted. "Sounds like you have got a yarn at that," he admitted. "Which only goes to prove that even a blind pig will stumble on an acorn now an' then. Well, go ahead an' write it. What the hell you bothering me about it for?"

So Obie Ober bounced out of the m. e.'s sanctum of sanctums and batted out the story of Culpepper Twig for the edification and entertainment of the 150,000 readers of the *Daily Herald.* It drew a nominal amount of chuckles when it appeared in print the day following, being read with more than passing interest by one of the two occupants of Room 31 of the Allemon Hotel.

The Allemon is not one of the Steel City's better hostelries. Nor were the occupants of Room 31 among the city's outstanding guests. Indeed, Colonel Smackington P. B. Goobey and his Man Friday, Mr. Al Beagle, were not, and did not crave to be, well known in Pittsburgh, being particularly anxious to escape the notice, however casual, of the law.

A bit of a deal in the Middle Western city, whereby Colonel Goobey had sold to the city's honest burghers some $3,500 worth of stock in a nonexistent shoe factory, had caused the pair to flee to Pittsburgh and to go into temporary retirement in the Allemon. Colonel Goobey, portly and important-looking, caught the "All Aboard" column over his first rye and soda of the day. He tossed the newspaper across the room to Mr. Beagle, a double for the saturnine movie star, Ned Sparks. "Al," he remarked, "do you see what I see in that story?"

Mr. Beagle frowned his way through the story, making, as was his wont, a gruesome face over any and all words of more than one syllable. "Yeah," he finally growled. "I see where some cutie has made himself a basketful of dough." Then he held up a warning finger. "But don't go gettin' any hot ideas, Smackie. You an' me's too hot right now for any action. You an' me's layin' low till we can blow this country. Havana or Rio will look plenty sweet, an' we ain't taking no chances. Besides, we ain't got a thing to peddle to this Twig jerk."

Colonel Goobey shook his head. "Al," he declared mournfully, "you disappoint me. I'm afraid you lack the proper spirit. Just because you and I are not . . . er . . . in the best graces of our fellowmen at present, you are satisfied to hide away in this miserable hole, when a veritable fortune awaits the gentle touch of our, or my, fingers. *Tch, tch, tch.* Much as I hate to say it, your attitude is positively craven."

That the Colonel was practically accusing him of showing the old hound disturbed Mr. Beagle little. "Mebbe so, Smackie," he shrugged. "Mebbe I'm yellow, but I'd rather be yellow an' free than brave an' in the clink. You never did a turn in Leavenworth, Smackie; you don't know how tough it is in them pens. If you want to take this guy Twig, go ahead. But not me. I'm sticking right here till I can make it to Cuba."

Colonel Goobey puffed at his cigar and surveyed his partner through suddenly narrowed eyes. "That," he presently remarked, "is what *you* think. I happen to think different. My dear Al, in the words of the poet, whither I go, thou goest—or else! Do you think I'm going to let you run around loose, dumb as you are? Not that I distrust you, my boy, but I'd hate to have you get picked up. You might sing a song, and I'm afraid—very much afraid—your lyrics might not suit me. Under my protection, your chances of getting picked up by the eager law are considerably less than if you are left to roam at will. Besides, I need you in the little venture I am planning in Cider Creek."

Then his voice lost its softness and note of cajolery. "We're leaving for Cider Creek Sat'day, Al," he snapped. "An' when I say 'we,' I don't mean 'me.' "

COLONEL GOOBEY was no dummy. He had read between the lines of Obie Ober's column. He had secured for himself a clear, clean-cut picture of Culpepper Twig of Cider Creek, and he had identified Senator Flick and the other Cider Creekians mentioned in the story. Therefore, when a streamliner deposited the Colonel and Mr. Beagle in Cider Creek a day or two later, the Colonel was ready for all eventualities and all comers. He had armed himself with a very skillfully forged letter of introduction to Senator Flick. He was prepared with a sales talk which he was confident could not help but extract from the senator and from his fellow citizens of Cider Creek, including Culpepper Twig, any and all loose cash which might be lying about, collecting dust. In addition, he had supplied Jonas Peters, editor and publisher of the Cider Creek *Daily Wallop*, with an advance notice of the forthcoming arrival of one "Colonel Smackington P. B. Goobey," noted Western industrialist, who would study Cider Creek's potentialities as a prospective manufacturing site.

As for meeting up with Culpepper Twig himself, the Colonel was smugly satisfied as to his ability to promote same without outside help.

Being a surveyor of the lay of the land from away back, the Colonel put in three days in apparent inaction, after he and Mr. Beagle had reserved and been installed in rooms in the the Potter House, Cider Creek's lone hotel; Joe Potter, proprietor, room clerk, barkeep, head waiter and, at times, valet de chamber. He was careful to make every move subtly unostentatious. He surveyed Jake Smiley's busy sawmill. He strolled about the town, viewing vacant lots, the dismantled iron foundry where Cully Twig had made his big killing. He especially paid attention to idle land located along the creek from whence the town took its name.

Colonel Goobey played all angles, and played them well.

He rented a typewriter, set up a phony office in one of his rooms at the

Potter House, and kept the morose Mr. Beagle busy pecking away, acting as much like a private secretary as was possible. He did permit the unhappy and nervous Al to keep a bottle of rye hidden under the bed, from which he was permitted to take refreshment every hour on the hour.

Cider Creek was properly and deeply impressed. Senator Flick peered anxiously from behind the curtains of his bank office at the pompously stalking Colonel. Jonas Peters, from his newspaper office, anxiously awaited an opportunity to approach the big man. Sebastian Tilt, Senator Flick's counselor at law, dusted off his books on corporate law and crammed industriously, while Dad Murphy, operator of the Elite Eatery, added another vegetable to the forty-cent blue-plate special.

Meanwhile, totally unaware of the existence of a Colonel Goobey or an Al Beagle, his variable-pitch ears twitching in the balmy summer breeze as he parked in front of Dave Mooch's pool emporium, counting his rug-sized bank roll at least once a week, and still master of the cue against all comers, Culpepper Twig pursued the even soprano of his ways as Cider Creek's most eligible bachelor, if you counted his Dun & Bradstreet rating, and still the village problem No. 1 in "What, If Anything, Is Humanity Coming to?"

That he was first on the list "To Be Taken Quick" never entered Cully's rattley head.

The fourth day after his arrival in Cider Creek, Colonel Goobey called upon Senator Flick. The senator saw him coming and hurried Beany Burns, his cashier, out to purchase a handful of cigars. Senator Flick was deeply impressed by the Colonel's manner and his letter of introduction. Fifteen minutes in the banker's company and Goobey realized there would be no need to dawdle, that he could come to his point quickly, swinging into fast action and swinging safely. Which he did.

"Senator," he said, leaning forward across Brother Flick's desk and regarding him earnestly, "I am going to take you into my confidence. You look to me to be a man of the world, a man who knows the answers. I represent a very large concern, and we are contemplating locating one of our plants in Cider Creek. Naturally, we shall have to purchase some property. I understand you are quite a large landowner, and I see no reason why you and I should not be able to do business. I shall see to it that you get in on the ground floor, and naturally, a man of your importance in Cider Creek—well, your word will carry a lot of weight with other investors."

Senator Flick swelled importantly, taking on the general contour of a pouter pigeon. "You flatter me, Colonel," he said. "I . . . er . . . am not without some influence in these parts; indeed, the good citizens have twice sent me to represent them in Washington. I assure you, sir, you will not regret having taken me into your confidence."

Colonel Goobey nodded portentously. "Good," he exclaimed. "Now let me explain just what my company's plans are. We shall build quite a plant and, to assure ourselves of the full co-operation of the town, we shall permit certain citizens—established, responsible ones—to invest some money. It will take, in fact, about twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars to induce my company to establish a plant here." Carelessly, the Colonel continued as he saw a doubtful frown cross the senator's

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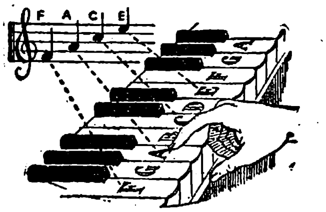

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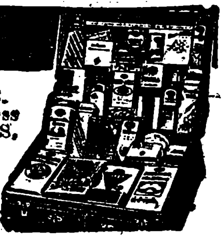

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phiz. "Of course, that much money probably could be subscribed by you yourself, or you and one or two of your friends. But we want at least ten men included in the deal."

The Colonel knew how to call his shots, and when to quit calling them. He left the banker a few minutes later, leaving that gentleman up in the clouds. Without Senator Flick being aware of what was going on, he had learned exactly how much the Cider Creek traffic would stand, that he could count on three or four thousand dollars coming from the senator and perhaps as much more from other citizens. No mention was made of Culpepper Twig; the Colonel was willing to bide his time before roping Culpepper.

That evening, in the quiet of their rooms, the Colonel gave Al a partial outline of the set-up. "I'm going to make this look plenty good, Al," he declared. "I'm even going to turn over our thirty-five hundred to Flick to make him think I'm cutting in on the deal myself. The minute I drop our dough into the kitty, the senator'll be a gone goose. Getting this guy Twig into the game is going to be a bit tough; the senator hates the guy's guts and wants no part of him, but he's got more ready cash than anyone else in the burg, and we ain't overlooking a thin dime."

Senator Flick was permitted to stew for a day or two, and the banker did a fine job of stewing. He called upon several citizens of Cider Creek, enlisting their support, and cash, in raising the twenty-five thousand the Colonel had indicated would be necessary to swing the plant. The best he could do, however, was to line up fifteen thousand dollars. It became more and more evident that the hated Culpepper Twig would have to be approached. Either that or the bank would have to accept a few mortgages, mortgages on property already in hock, and when the senator thought of the hell a roving bank examiner might raise should he happen along and find the bank's books overloaded, he shuddered and tossed the idea into his figurative ash can.

Culpepper Twig had to be included. That was that!

Colonel Goobey met Culpepper the next evening, during the dinner hour in Dad Murphy's. Cully was polishing off a second helping of pie à la mode when the Colonel and Al entered, and unbidden, sat themselves at the youth's table. The Colonel introduced himself and his companion and started pouring it on. He complimented Culpepper on his prowess as a financier, on his astuteness and his prospects.

"I shoot pool, too," put in Culpepper between bites of pie. "You ever handle a cue?"

The Colonel frowned at this, and kicked Al across the shins as he saw the latter come suddenly to life. "Hardly," replied the promoter. "My secretary and I seldom have time for such pleasures. Business, you know. Always on the go."

While they were thus engaged in chewing, talking and listening, Jake Smiley, the sawmill owner, who was currently engaged in running for county commissioner, entered the café. He carried a bundle of cards, a batch of which he dropped onto the table before the trio. "Pass 'em out to your friends, boys," he exclaimed, "an' don't forget Jake Smiley come next election."

Unmindful of the interruption, the Colonel continued to talk, Culpepper to eat and dyspeptic Al to stack and shuffle and cut the political cards. Al was far more at home with the pasteboards than with a typewriter, and so deft was his careless manipulation that he attracted Culpepper's attention. The latter sat, open-mouthed, staring at Mr. Beagle's fast-flying hands. "Gee, mister," he finally remarked, "you'd sure make a hit with the boys down to the firehouse. You sure can sling them cards around."

COLONEL GOOBEY and the senator got down to serious business the next day. The Colonel talked tough turkey to the banker, finally getting him to agree to inviting Culpepper to sit in on the deal. Then he hinted that he, the Colonel, would see to it that the Flick property would be purchased for the factory site, and at the senator's price. That swung the banker into line, and when the Colonel took his leave the deal was in the bag.

"The guy's a bigger crook than we ever thought of being," the Colonel confided to Beagle that night. "After all, I admit I'm on the take. He's supposed to be an honest citizen. Honest, I don't think he's at all interested in our 'factory.' All he cares about is peddling that swamp he calls property for two, three hundred bucks an acre."

Al poured himself a drink. "You got it figured out how we're going to get hold of that dough?" he inquired. "These guys certainly ain't rubes enough to just hand it over."

Colonel Goobey snorted. "Of course, I got it figured out," he exclaimed. "We'll give 'em the old switched-envelope business. That's where you come in. I know it's old and corny, but it'll work swell here. Saturday afternoon, after the bank closes, everyone is to show up in the senator's office, bringing his dough. O. K., so here's what we do. Tomorrow I'm buying a couple of those big envelopes. When all the dough is counted and stacked at that meeting, I'll put it in one of the envelopes and seal it and toss it to you and tell you to make a notation of the amount an' the date. You'll have a phony envelope all ready, stuffed with paper, and I'll see to it that you get plenty of chance to make the switch. Then we'll have the senator lock the dough in his vault, which won't be opened till Monday. By that time you an' me'll be in Rio, or damn close. I tell you, this is the easiest touch ever."

Mr. Beagle nodded, his mournful face screwing up into what might have passed for a smile. "Sounds O. K., Smackie," he muttered. "I'll be damn glad when we're out of here, no matter how soft things look. I'm so nervous I caught myself giving me a fast deal playin' solitaire this mornin'."

A group of citizens had been delegated by Senator Flick to call upon Culpepper, sound him out on the proposed enterprise and invite him to become an investor. The evening before the meeting, they found Cully engaged in taking an unwary soap salesman over the jumps in a fifty-ball game in the Mooch establishment. Culpepper listened to the arguments of the committee between shots. "You see, Cully," Hep Mueller, the village butcher, spokesman of the group, concluded, "we gotta raise at least twenty grand to get this company to put a factory here. There ain't that kind of ready cash in town 'less you join up with us. You got ten, twelve thousand bucks somewhere, an' it ain't doin' you no good hid that way."

"It ain't doin' me no harm, either," Culpepper put in. "But I'll think it over, boys, and mebbe I'll be at that meetin' tomorrow. Who's goin' to handle this money after it is raised—Senator Flick?"

"No one gets to handle it, Cully," Editor Peters interjected. "We all kick in and the dough goes into the bank vault, and no one touches it without the rest of the crowd knows what for and why. It'll all be spent right here in th' Creek. We just have to put up the money to show our good faith."

The cue artist studied carefully a five-ball combination. "Who's that skinny, sad-lookin' guy I seen hangin' around with the Colonel? You know who I mean—the guy who looks like someone just stole the cake out of his lunch."

It was explained that Mr. Beagle was the Colonel's secretary. "Hm-m-m," observed Culpepper. "I'll bet if ever they play rummy or casino, the secretary wins."

WHEN the delegation reported back to Senator Flick and informed the banker that good old Culpepper had not jumped at the chance to toss his bank roll into the kitty, the senator burped and harrumped and declared to goodness he didn't understand how a no-good, useless bum like young Twig would hesitate to join up with his betters in such an undertaking. However, when he was told Cully had promised to think it over and half promised to attend the meeting the next day, his relief was all but obvious.

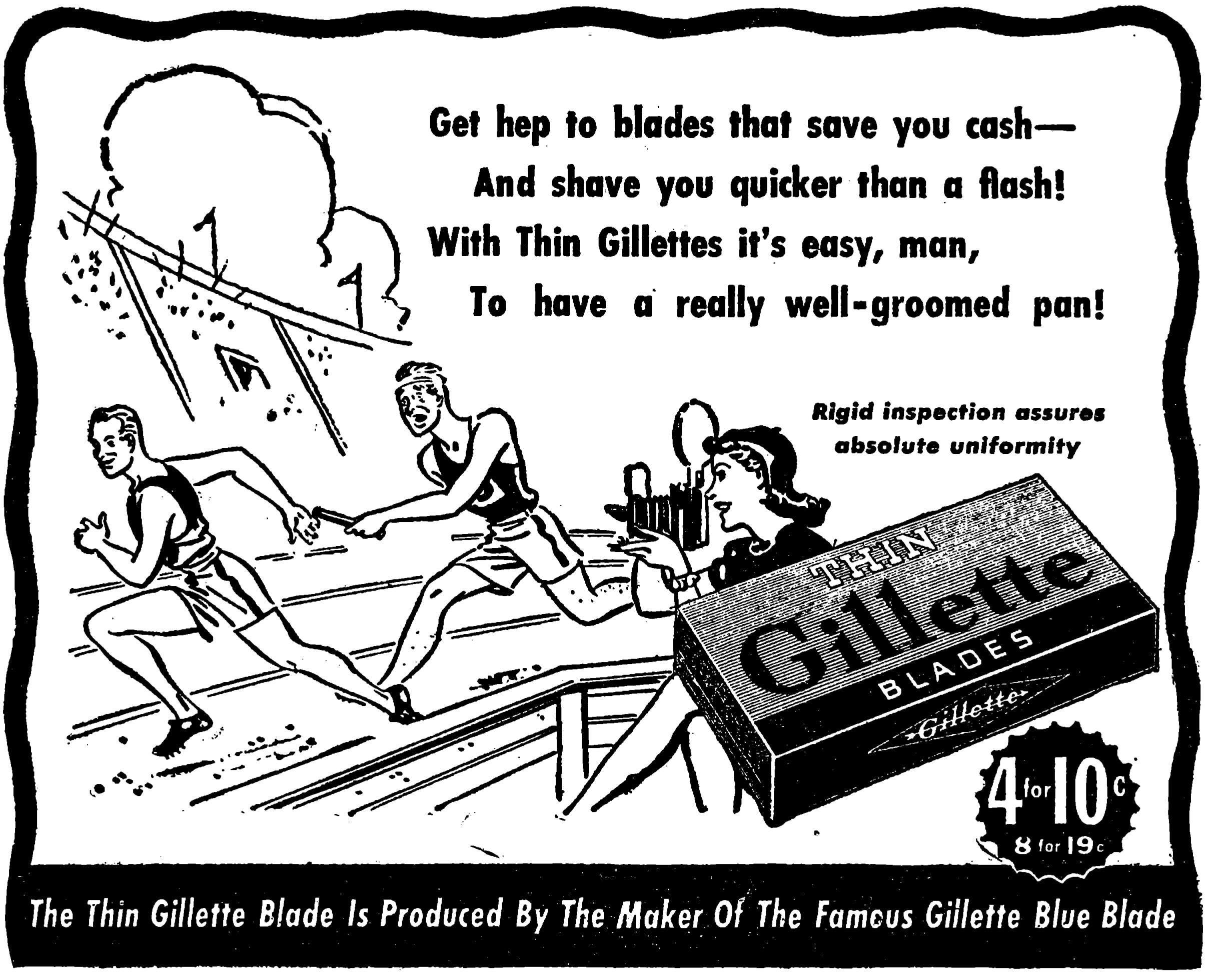
Colonel Goobey ate his breakfast Saturday morning with more than the usual amount of relish. Life, reflected the Colonel, was exceedingly good. Everything, every one of his plans, was working out. By breakfast time on the morrow, he and Mr. Beagle would be far, far away, with a neat stack of bills stowed about their respective persons. Cider Creek would be sadder and wiser, especially Senator Flick. The Colonel felt so good he left a dollar tip, causing a squeal of delight to issue from the well-rounded throat of Janie, the Elite waitress.

Accompanied by the funereal Mr. Beagle, who lugged a voluminous brief case, the Colonel put in his appearance at the bank promptly at 12:30, the time agreed upon for the important confab. Grouped about the long table in the directors' room were the prospective investors: Jonas Peters, the editor; Dad Murphy; Fats McKim, the Cider Creek insurance Tycoon; Jake Smiley; Counselor Dickery Snubb; Lawyer Tilt and Senator Flick. As the Colonel took his seat at the head of the table, flanked on one side by Mr. Beagle and on the other by the senator, Culpepper and his bosom pal, Dave Mooch, entered the room. Culpepper carried a parcel, a parcel which could contain only one thing—dough.

The Colonel breathed a gentle sigh and unobtrusively kicked Mr. Beagle's bony shanks.

Rising importantly and ponderously to his feet, Senator Flick took charge of the meeting. "Gentlemen," he began, "you all know why we are here. This, thanks to our good friend, Colonel Goobey, is a red-letter day in Cider Creek's history. We are on the threshold of bigger and better things, of a new life." His listeners fidgeted and sweated as they sensed the start of one of the senator's political harangues. But the Colonel cut him short.

"Thank you, senator," he said, bowing in the direction of the banker. "Let us get down to business." He reached into the brief case on Mr. Beagle's lap and produced a stack of bills. "I am investing thirty-five hundred dollars of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my own money, gentlemen. Now, if you will turn over your . . . . ah . . . contributions, we shall have our good friend, the senator, lock it safely in his vault."

One by one the men about the table dug deep into the pockets of their best store clothes, producing rolls and wads and bundles of bills. With scarcely a word, they shoved their cash down to the senator's and Colonel's end of the table, where the banker gave it a meticulous count, finally arranging it neatly into piles and then sliding it into the big envelope provided by the Colonel. Last to come forward was Culpepper. There was an air of tense expectancy in the room as the gawky yokel hefted his paper-wrapped parcel in his big hands. Even the usually cool Colonel was unable to mask his feelings, and his eyes bored into the face of Mr. Twig. At last, with a final pat of his hand, Culpepper slid the money down the table.

"Twenty-three thousand six hundred and forty dollars," announced Senator Flick. "Fine work, gentlemen, fine work," he continued. "You are to be congratulated, eh, Colonel?"

Colonel Goobey beamed. "Most certainly, gentlemen; most certainly." He took the big envelope, wet the flap and sealed it tight, then handed it carelessly to his solemn secretary. "Make a note of the amount and the date, Beagle," he commanded. Then, arms extended to enable his hands to grip the sides of the table, he leaned forward, half elbowing Senator Flick to one side, effectively screening Beagle's manipulations of the envelopes. "Gentlemen," he said, "I think I can promise you that work will be started within the month on the new plant. I shall inform my people today of Cider Creek's decision to go onward and upward. I am glad to be associated with such a forward-thinking, astute group of businessmen."

With that, after much handshaking all around, the meeting broke up, all hands following Senator Flick to the bank's vault, where he carefully deposited the envelope handed him by Al Beagle.

The "taking" of Cider Creek had been effected!

Back in their rooms, the Colonel and Al joggled their livers with subdued but none the less merry jigs. "Like rollin' outa bed," Al exclaimed, pumping his companion's puffy paw. "Now, let's get outa here, an' fast!"

"Right," responded the Colonel. "The streamliner stops here this evening at nine thirty. When she rolls out we'll be aboard. Get packed, son, get packed.

In happy majesty, the Colonel and Al, the latter laden down with luggage, swung down Main Street that evening, headed for the railway station. The Colonel nodded amiably in response to the shy greetings of several Cider Creekians. They left the brighter lighted portion of the street, making their way past a feed store, crossing an alleyway to pass the Smiley lumber-storage yard. The evening was warm, and the bags were heavy. Mr. Beagle was drenched with sweat. "Hey, Colonel," he finally grunted, "we're outa sight now, how about callin' off this act and you grabbin' one of these bags. Jeez, they're heavy."

There was a sudden scuffling sound and the note of a choked-off cry. Turning in bewilderment, the Colonel found himself alone. Mr. Beagle had disappeared—disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and gulped him down as a hungry hound might gulp a chunk of meat. The Colonel peered down the dark alley between the lumber yard and the feed store, started to make his way down it, but the mellow sound of the streamliner's horn brought him up short. Colonel Goobey was no chump, as has been pointed out before. He could smell trouble without having to have his nose rubbed in same. Quickly he swung about, his feet scorching the uneven pavement of Cider Creek's Main Street until they carried him to the stainless steel steps of the streamliner, and baggageless, Colonel Smackington P. B. Goobey was whisked from the Cider Creek scene.

ORDINARILY, Cider Creek enjoyed the quiet and silence, to say nothing of the peace of the tomb, on a Sunday. But the Sabbath following the consummation of the "big deal" was destined to be different. And how! For when Abigail Flick, dutiful wife of the senator, went to the Flick well for a bucket of soft water with which to wash her hair, she found, to her horror, clinging to the well rope, halfway down the well, Mr. Al Beagle, in a sad state of disrepair.

Mrs. Flick shrieked as only a Flick could shriek, and when the senator found the cause of her outcry, his own bellow was heard in the yard of the Presbyterian Church, two miles away.

Elementary guessing was enough to solve the whys and wherefores of Mr. Beagle's temporary residence in the Flick cistern. The senator raised a hue and cry—and Mr. Beagle was deposited in the Cider Creek clink. He refused to talk, but talk was not needed. What was needed was fast action, and some way to open the bank vault before nine o'clock the following morning, when the time lock should swing wide the armor-plate doors. The natural supposition was, of course, that the Colonel had the dough, but where was the Colonel?

It was a furrowed-browed, anxious group of men who gathered in the board room of the bank Monday morning. The time lock did its stuff, and the cashier brought in the big envelope which had been deposited with so much joy on Saturday. With nervous fingers, Senator Flick ripped open the flap, and led the groans as a shower of neatly cut pieces of newspaper fluttered to the table top.

Hap Mueller stormed to his feet, his fist waving threateningly under the senator's nose. "It's all your fault, you skinflint!" he bellowed. "We oughta tar an' feather you. You an' your Colonel."

Senator Flick started back, half in fright, half in amazement that anyone would dare address a Flick in such fashion. "A damn good idea," roared Jake Smiley, always a man of direct action. There were angry mutterings from some of the others, with the two attorneys, Sebastian Tilt and Dickery Snubb, attempting to restore peace and order, if not complete quiet. Then came an interruption. Through the door dawdled Culpepper Twigg. Without a word, he pitched an envelope on the table, an exact duplicate of the one the senator had opened not three minutes before.

"There's your money, boys," drawled Culpepper, "less what I put in." He shook his head. "My, but you fellers sure are lucky I keep my eyes open."

Eager, trembling hands grasped at the envelope, spilling its contents, beautiful greenbacks, onto the table. There was a mad scramble as each of the would-be investors retrieved his own. It was Jonas Peters who spoke first. Breathing a sigh of vast relief, he turned to Culpepper.

"By gosh, Cully," he said, "you've done it again. How in hell did you get next to those crooks?"

Culpepper grinned. "They ate with me tother evening at Dad's place," he explained. "While we was sittin' there, Jake come in with a lot of them cards he's been a-passin' out, and he dropped a bunch of 'em in front of that guy, Beagle. I watched him fool with 'em, and what he could do, shufflin' and cuttin' and pertendin' to deal, the likes I never seen. I figgered no private secretary would be that clever with cards, so I kept my eyes on him and I saw him switch envelopes on us Sat'day."

As Culpepper finished there was another interruption, and a policeman entered, dragging Al Beagle. "What you goin' to do with this guy, gents?" the officer inquired. "The judge says you ain't got much right to hold him. It's the Colonel you want."

Mr. Beagle's eyes lighted as he saw the two envelopes on the table. "So you got it back, did you?" he sneered. "Well, if the Colonel had done what I wanted and kept the cash in his pocket instead of putting it in them bags, you'd been out of luck."

A sudden thought came to Counselor Tilt. "By the way, what happened to the money Colonel Goobey had—the thirty-five hundred?"

All eyes turned to Culpepper. The latter shrugged. "Don't ask me, boys," he said. "That's all the dough me an' Dave found after we grabbed this feller here Sat'day night."

Al Beagle's face turned a deep, dark crimson, and he appeared to have trouble catching his breath. With a curse, he slammed his hat down on the table. "Why, that dirty crook!" he roared. "That Goobey! That rat! Why, he give me the old double shuffle!"

"Yeah," said Culpepper, "an' neat, too!"

THE END.

IN THE CHIPS

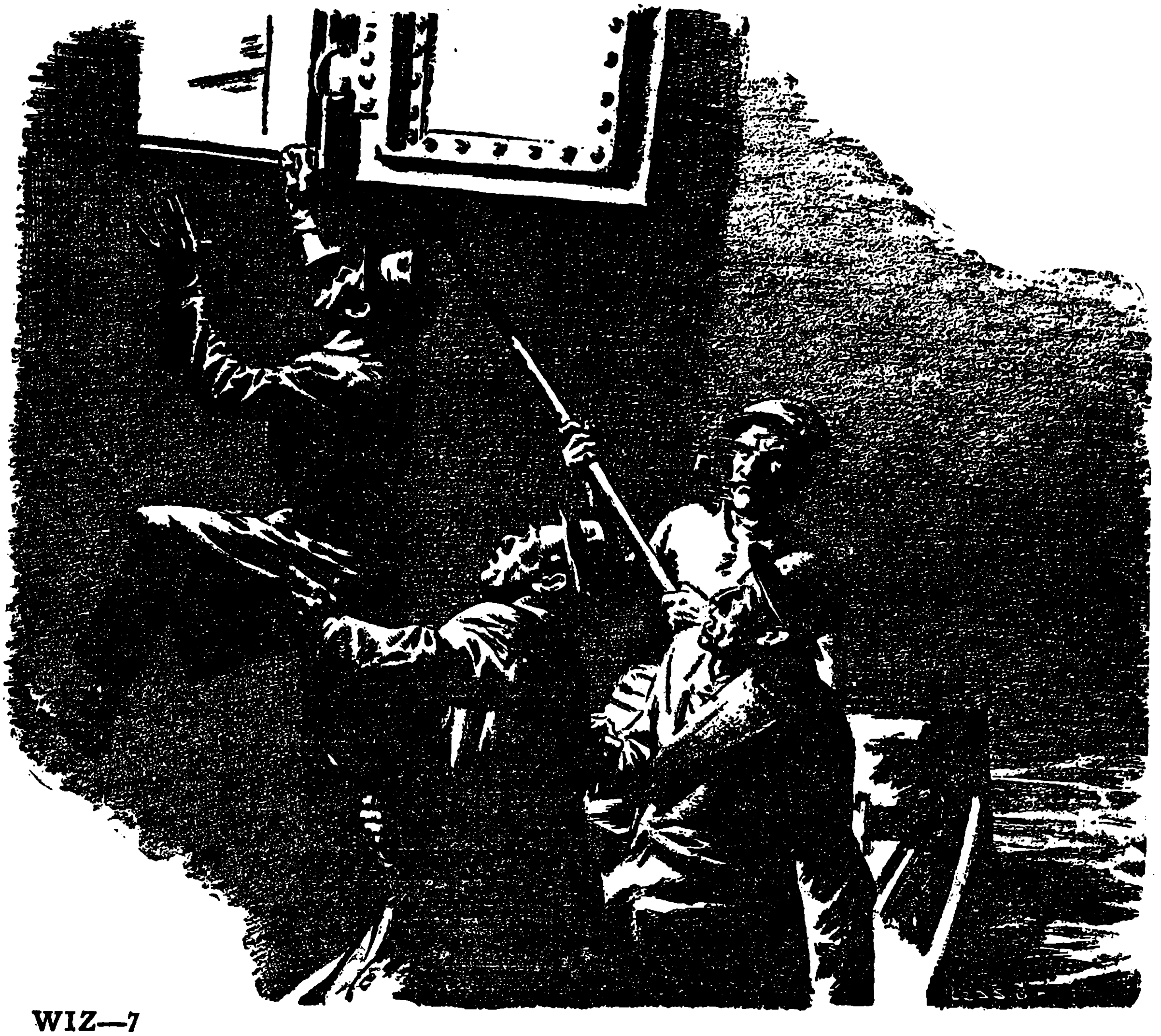
BY ROSS RUSSELL

● It was a foggy night—like the night cops fought with sea-gulls for what was left of hi-jackers of the *Monte Carlo.*

"Numbers!" cried Doc Diggins dreamily, tilting his long, wise head up and his eyelids down. "When I called for the time of day this morning it was nine thirty-one, on the nose. Well do I remember! The operator had a voice like Hedy Lamarr. Gentlemen—add nine, three, and the final digit, one, and you will get the number of this apartment—thirteen!" Diggins' expression became radiant, then triumphant.

"Which number is very unlucky," Wimpy said. He was a small, dark, bitter man with a turned-in nose.

"Diggins, you are a damn fool!" Guts Keegan said bluntly. Then he stopped pacing the floor and corrected himself. "No, *I* am the damn fool." He said this very slowly, defining each syllable. "*I* am the damn fool, for associating with you, Diggins. Here we have a chance to make some real dough



and you come up with brilliant thoughts like playing numbers! Numbers!"

He wheeled and faded into the haze of cigar smoke at the farther end of the apartment ($27.50, with maid service and utilities). From the moth-ravaged sofa, Doc Diggins and Wimpy watched him, as uncomfortable as a pair of frosh at a sorority tea.

"Arguing," Wimpy finally said, to plug the silence, "ain't raising five grand. How about the Chinese lottery? Ain't that honest?"

"Sure," replied Guts Keegan in a withering tone. "Like a Mexican election! Listen, you jerks!" He suddenly reappeared through the smoke, bulky and menacing. "I asked for constructive suggestions. We need five grand!"

"Horses," suggested Diggins in a diffident tone, and quickly winced as Guts cut him down with a glare. "No, no! Now, look, fellas, we gotta quit kidding around, honest!"

He stood up, brushing the creases in his trousers. "Guts, here, has what looks like a foolproof scheme to make ourselves twenty thousand boffoes. All we require is five grand to take over available equipment, reduce the scrap iron to small bails, and haul the stuff to the Jap freighter."

Diggins had the soft, nudging voice of a sex-show barker, and now spoke as if addressing a sizable gathering.

"Until recently this lucrative business has been under the control of the Japanese themselves, who have now, fortunately for our purposes, been told to lay off. Guts has the set-up cased. We cannot miss. As American citizens we have only to seize fortune by the forelock. The sole requisite remains the necessary capital!"

"And you gimme ideas like numbers!" Keegan said vindictively.

"We are serious now," said Diggins in a sober tone.

"Boys, I was thinking," said Wimpy. "Suppose this country should get in a beef with these Japs. You and Doc and myself would be the first to go. Maybe some of that same scrap might come back in our puss in the form of bullets!" His face blanched with the thought.

Guts dropped both hands to his loose, heavy hips. "A fine time to become a philosopher. With your share of twenty grand you can become a big shot. Or would you rather be a miserable dime pusher all your life?"

Wimpy became smaller, but did not answer the question. His forehead worked angrily. Finally he volunteered: "Well, I dunno, how about one of these salary loans? The sign I seen says you don't even need no co-signers—"

Guts raised his open hand wrathfully. "We have no credit!" he cried. "If we had credit we could easily raise five grand between the three of us!"

"At least I'm trying," Wimpy protested, getting up. "You guys are just shooting the bull. The hell with it. I don't think the crackpot scheme would work, anyway. I'm going out and shoot some pin ball."

"Now, cool down, Wimpy," Diggins said placatingly.

"Keep your hair on," Guts said.

"Nuts," Wimpy replied. He opened the closet and jerked his black Chesterfield off the hanger. In doing so the coat upended and a small yellow disk, about the size of a dollar, but thicker, rolled out on the floor. It had a dead, bonelike ring to it. The disk was elaborately and beautifully embossed, and bore the intertwined initials—J. R.

"Jeeze cripes!" Wimpy sang out.

"Gentlemen!" Diggins exclaimed.

It was Guts, the inevitable realist, who cried: "One hundred bucks!"

"So help me!" Wimpy said. "If it ain't one of Deep Sea Jim Ryan's one-hundred-buck roulette chips! Didn't I tell you guys I was a century short the last time I came back from the *Monte Carlo?*"

Diggins verified the fact and became nostalgic about the good old days, only months passed, when they were better heeled and able to afford sortees to the gambling ship *Monte Carlo* anchored off the coast of southern California. "Ah, yes, gentlemen, the good old, not-so-distant days when we were in the chips!" Diggins seemed on the verge of tears.

"In the chips!" Guts Keegan repeated, holding the yellow disk in his flat, open hand, turning it this way and that, so as to catch the light. "Chips! One chip—many chips! Wimpy, you have given me an idea!"

"Yeah? Good!" Wimpy said.

"Wimpy," Guts Keegan said. "Do you remember the Rose Bowl game of 1937?"

"How could I forget it," Wimpy replied. "Didn't we net three grand between us?"

"Exactly!" Keegan exclaimed. "Compared to Rose Bowl tickets, duplicating one of these roulette chips should be mere child's play!" The bright glitter of the yellow chip held his baby blue eyes in a fascinated stare.

Wimpy made vague, fluttering motions with his hands. "Guts, you mean —" Wimpy tongued his lips. "You are saying we should take Jim Ryan for five grand with phony roulette chips?"

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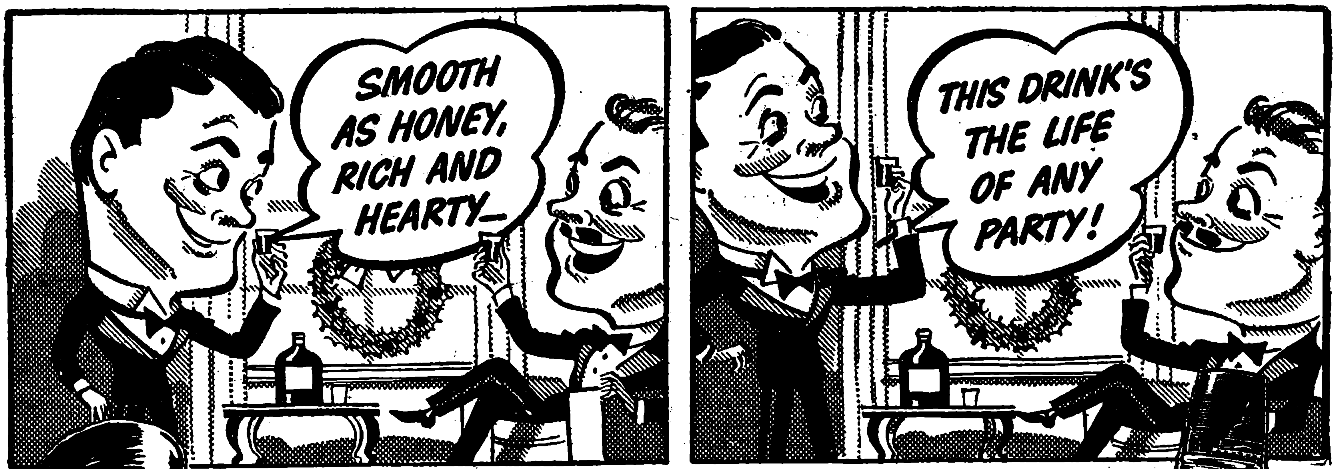
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Keegan's eyes narrowed. His thoughts were many leagues away. "You catch on slow," he said finally. "But you catch on. It is simple. All we do is find a lad to duplicate five grand worth of Ryan's counters. Then we load up, make us a little trip out to Ryan's gambling boat, and cash in. Simple as going to a bank!"

Wimpy sniffed dubiously. "Ain't counterfeiting a Federal rap?"

"Don't be a fool!" Keegan boomed. "This is not counterfeiting. Deep Sea Jim Ryan operates an illegal business. We don't even have to break one of the commandments."

Wimpy and Doc Diggins had paled considerably. "Yeah, *but*," Wimpy said, "Deep Sea Jim has his own kind of law, Guts."

Diggins fingered one side of his long, sharp nose. "Ryan is pretty rough, Guts." The tone was fatherly.

"Yeah," Wimpy added hurriedly. "Remember what Ryan done to them heist artists that tried to play Captain Kidd and hijack the *Monte Carlo* one foggy night? Jeez, the Los Angeles cops hadda fight with the sea gulls for what was left of those guys!"

"We will choose a clear night," Guts said simply.

"It listens awful dangerous," Wimpy said.

Diggins was very sober. "It's taking a terrible chance."

"Since when did we stop taking

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chances?" Keegan demanded. "Of course, if you gents feel the odds aren't right, I suppose I will have to look for a partner with a little more imagination—"

Keegan flipped the chip into his coat pocket. "At that, a two-way cut on twenty grand would not be hard to take!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Diggins urged.

"You wouldn't do that to your old pals!" Wimpy cried.

Doc Diggins assumed a judicial expression. "Guts, my boy, perhaps we have sunk our teeth into something. The question remains, can we find a man to duplicate this . . . er . . . article perfectly?"

"Any first-class embosser in any large city," Guts said. "We will eliminate Los Angeles, on account of Ryan probably had his equipment made here and the manufacturer might tip him off to the play. We will do our business in San Francisco."

An agreement was soon reached. By pooling their total liquid resources, Keegan, Wimpy, and Diggins had a grand total of six hundred and fifty-odd dollars, not counting the specimen chip. It was decided that Keegan and Wimpy would make the trip north to the Bay City and supervise the duplicating angle, while Diggins remained in town to raise more funds. By cutting the corners, they would require at least a full grand to underwrite immediate operations, pay the embosser, refurbish wardrobes for the proper front, and, finally and importantly, board the *Monte Carlo* with adequate cash in folding money to prime the play. While awaiting the result of the embosser's craft in San Francisco, Keegan and Wimpy, being natives to that town, where to solicit additional funds in the way of touches, bites, lugs, and sundry loans.

THREE days later, on a Friday afternoon, Guts and Wimpy, slightly wan from their sojourn in the foggy city, disembarked from a Greyhound bus and were met by Diggins in the community sedan. Back at the Westlake Park apartment, they unpacked their suitcases and unwrapped the precious boxes of counterfeit chips. There were six boxes, and each contained ten chips.

"We bought six grand worth," Wimpy explained. "It only cost an extra fin."

"Fifty cents per chip, even in quantities!" Diggins exclaimed.

"We woulda hafta bought thirty grand before it went down to forty-five cents a chip," Wimpy replied.

Keegan broke a wrapper. "Nothing but the best for Mr. Ryan. See if you can spot the difference." He proffered Diggins the original specimen and opened the carton.

"As I live and breathe!" opined Mr. Diggins after a minute inspection of the samples. "As alike as peas in a pod. Then we are ready for the big night?"

"The guy what made 'em, the embosser, said we shouldn't use the chips for four or five days on account of—what was it, Guts?"

"He said the finish had to set if we wanted the high gloss to remain intact." Keegan repacked the chips and lined up the boxes neatly on the dresser. "O. K., Diggins, what luck did you have while we were away?"

Diggins smiled expansively. "Gentlemen," he announced. "The old cunning has not deserted yours truly. One way and another, by hook and crook, I raised two hundred and sixty-eight dollars!"

"Great!" Keegan said. "Wimpy and I didn't do that good, but we brought back better than two C's!" Guts emptied his wallet. A rapid count put the grand total of available sugar at just under eleven hundred dollars.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Diggins smiled. "Oh, by the way, who's Weinowski?"

"Weinowski!" Guts Keegan choked out. "What about Weinowski?"

"Well, he's been calling up here."

"Since when?" Keegan demanded, grabbing Diggins.

"Well, since yesterday. Wouldn't leave no message."

"Who is Weinowski?" asked Wimpy with alarm.

"The guy with the scrap iron!" Kegan cried, this time grabbing his soft hat. "Come on."

IT was a fence-inclosed acreage adjoining the city dump on the Whittier side of Los Angeles. A huge, weathered sign announced: "The House of a Million Parts. Highest Prices Paid in Cash for All Kinds of Junk. A. Weinowski, prop."

Behind an unpainted frame house, thousands of cast-off automobiles lay rusting and rotting in the bright sunshine.

"Hah!" Weinowski greeted. "Good thing you come today." He was a squat, bald, nearsighted man.

"What's up?" Keegan asked in a cheery tone, giving his hands a brisk rub.

"Plenty," said Weinowski. "You still want the junk?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then you gotta pay," said the junk man. "Now. Today!"

Keegan smiled and shook his head. "Next week."

"Today." The junk man was adamant. "Now!"

They began to argue, in a bantering tone at first, then with greater vehemence. It seemed that the Federal government, cognizant of the fact that millions of tons of scrap metal were being shipped to Japan, there to be converted into materials of war, had at last decided to align export restrictions with foreign policy. At the very moment legislation was being speeded to curtail further shipments to "aggressor nations." Mr. Weinowski, confronted with a closed market, was extremely anxious to move every possible ton of stock on hand with the least possible delay. Being an alien, and also a conservative merchant, he acted solely as middleman, accepting a small profit per ton while the plungers gambled with the larger profits. Weinowski intimated that a cash deal on the remaining scrap might be made within the hour.

"Bunk!" jeered Keegan. Instantly an ominous silence becalmed the verbal storm, and Guts, with a lavish gesture, whipped out a new century bank note. "My deposit on fifty tons at ten dollars a ton, baled and ready to load. We will pay the balance and take delivery tomorrow morning."

"Them fellas in Washington might pass a law against it before then," said Weinowski indecisively.

"This is Friday. There can't be any action until Monday!"

Weinowski studied the bank note. "What time tomorrow?"

"Eight a. m.," Keegan said quickly, and drove Diggins and Wimpy out of the House of a Million Parts. "Tonight's the night!" he announced as they started back toward town.

"Tonight!" Wimpy exclaimed. "What about what that embosser said about waiting five days?"

"Do we care whether the finish lasts or not?" Keegan demanded.

"Besides," Wimpy said, indicating the fog bank moving in off the Pacific. "It's gonna be foggy. It was on a night like this them heist artists tried to hijack Ryan. The cops hadda—"

"We've no time to lose," Keegan interrupted. "Doc, what's the name of that outfit that rents soup and fish?"

"The Nifty," replied Diggins in a gloomy tone.

"Fifth and Main," added Wimpy with stoical resignation.

BY the time they reached Naud Junction, which is approximately halfway to the beaches, it began to turn dark. The darkness came on a full half-hour ahead of time and smelled heavily of kelp. The fog made the air heavy, and its coolness piercing and chilling.

Diggins started the windshield wipers. They crawled along, watching the highway that twisted through the wall of smoky, gray atmosphere, sitting stiffly against the cushions in their rented dinner clothes and black Chesterfields. Diggins wore a derby jauntily, and Wimpy and Keegan wore soft, dark hats.

When they reached the parking lot at Long Beach it was impossible to see Ryan's sign more than a hundred feet away. The neon letters announcing "Free Parking for Jim Ryan's S. S. *Monte Carlo*" were fuzzy, and their gaudy primary colors diluted. They ignored the admonitions of the lot attendant and stowed the sedan in a corner near the street and exit gate. Keegan tossed the boy a half dollar. Wimpy began to cough.

"That silk muffler is more than an

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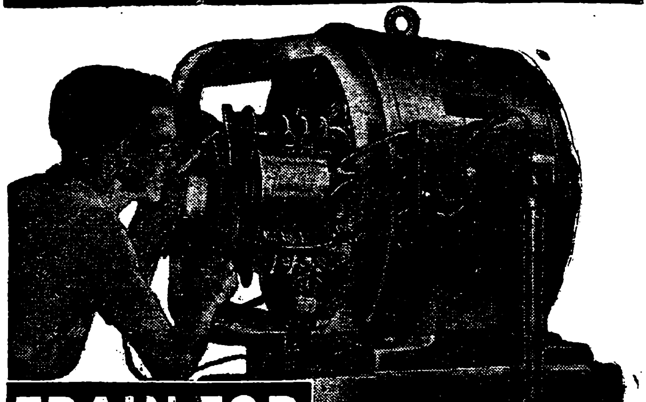

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ornament," Keegan said in a voice with a slight edge to it. "Use it."

"Yeah," Wimpy said. He shook away the cupful of beaded moisture that had collected on his hat and reset the angle of the brim.

They walked toward the brightly lighted area, a blinding white smudge in the curtain of damp, kelp-tanged grayness. They could feel the chips that each carried, a box in either pocket, like boxes of after-dinner mints. They might have been going to the theater.

There was a sea-food restaurant, a cigar stand, a battery of "one-armed bandits," apparently to whet gambling appetites, and a boat landing beyond. A sign announced that the fare for the run was twenty-five cents per round trip of twenty-five miles, payable in advance. The fact was that few customers disembarked from the floating casino with more than odd pennies. Ryan's gaming devices, scaled from hundred-dollar limit stud poker down to nickel slot machines, provided catch-alls for every denomination of coinage, save only the lowly copper. Below the landing, hidden in the fog, a motor launch muttered at idling speed. They walked toward the slippery gangplank.

"Uh-oh!" Diggins said suddenly. "Don't look, men. Let's make it fast."

"Hey, you!" called a bored voice. "You in the derby hat!"

They turned around. The man with the tired voice was coming out of the sea-food restaurant. He wore a white Palm Beach suit with enough material in it for a small tent. He was a good six inches taller than Guts Keegan, who stood six feet with his shoes on and was

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on the beefy side. He had a calm, sunburned, not unpleasant face, white teeth, marceled blond hair, blue eyes packed away in layers of fatty tissue, prominent eyebrows with a reddish tinge to them.

"Jeeze cripes!" Wimpy said in a surly guttural. "Tiny Starbuck!"

"Hello, there, Tiny!" said Diggins affably. He produced his most winning expression with the ease of a man turning up the volume on a good radio. He began to unbutton one of his rent gloves preparatory to proffering Starbuck the duke.

"Who's Starbuck?" Keegan whispered irritably.

"Ryan's bouncer," Wimpy supplied.

Starbuck crossed the landing and stopped between them and the gangplank. "Your kind isn't wanted on board, Diggins," Starbuck said in an impersonal tone.

"Ah, Tiny!" Diggins exclaimed. He held his bared hand out in the fog. "Those slugs I fed the slot machines that night—shucks, that was just for a gag!"

Starbuck made a gesture of finality. "No chiselers. We get along without your business, buddy."

Diggins snorted and began fanning his wallet. "Folding money tonight, big fella!" he said archly.

The large man did not glance at the wallet. He continued to study the top of Doc Diggins' hat. "This is our busy night," Starbuck said. "Perhaps some other time." A party in full dress, diamonds, and furs came whipping up. Starbuck greeted them with a discreet smile and stood aside so they could reach the motor launch. In a moment the boat went off.

Diggins shrugged philosophically. In a servile voice he told Keegan: "Well, Mr. Keegan, maybe the gentleman is right—a guy on a chauffeur's salary like me shouldn't be bucking house games, huh, Mr. Keegan?"

"Listen," Starbuck said. "You jokers all drove down in the same 1935 Chevvy sedan that needs a new coat of paint. Don't give me any mud about a chauffeur. Now walk it before I get irritable."

Keegan scowled at the bigger man. "Let's go," he ordered. They went back to the parking lot, where the attendant, mindful of Keegan's tip, sprang to attention and opened the car doors for them. Keegan did not tip him again.

"Now how in 'ell was I to know Tiny Starbuck would be on the dock?" Diggins complained when they had driven a block.

"Slugs in the slot machine!" Keegan commented with dripping sarcasm. "I oughta wring your neck!"

A sign drifted out of the fog, saying, "Water Taxi."

"Drive down there," Keegan ordered, indicating the neon arrow.

"Let's call the whole thing off," suggested Wimpy anxiously. "Drive to the water taxi," Keegan ordered darkly.

THE old man who ran the service was a dead ringer for Popeye. He took a hurricane pipe from his teeth, tamped it on the gunwale of a tiny water bug, and said he would make the twelve-mile run for twenty-five dollars. They could take it or they could leave it. There was no dickering. Keegan paid off and they climbed into the water bug.

The trip was slow, cold, and unnerving. Foghorns hooted mournfully at them. A short distance out they ran into a ground swell so that the taxi kept sliding up and down the writhing flanks of great, slick, green waves. Occasionally one of Deep Sea Jim Ryan's powerful launches, actually Liberty-powered rum runners reclaimed from preprohibition days, thundered past and they would catch the cross riff of the larger boat's wake. Wimpy sat huddled in the bow, peering ahead with frightened eyes.

Then there was a twin hoot and lights began to blossom in the gray element. The S. S. *Monte Carlo,* an outmoded passenger liner some four hundred feet in length, took shape and winked at them with its myriad eyes. Music drifted across the water, and the hollow clatter of drunken laughter. Popeye throttled down and headed toward the gangplank with its bobbing float.

Suddenly Wimpy, leaning forward, cried in an anguished voice: "Jeeze cripes! Starbuck!" The bouncer's expanse of white suiting was easily visible in the half light.

"How did he get here?" Diggins demanded indignantly.

"On a launch, of course," Keegan said. "Cut the wheel, Popeye. Gun it!"

"I think I seen a shark," Wimpy revealed. "What say we call the whole thing off?"

"Thought you fellers wanted the *Montey Carla!"* Popeye said as they angled away.

"Nix on the gangplank," Keegan said. "Isn't there some other way to get aboard?"

Popeye chewed it over. He took out his pipe and tamped it firmly. "For twenty-five dollars," he said.

Keegan paid off with a threatening gesture. Popeye drove the water bug straight out into the fog until they were clear of the steamer, killed the motor, cut the wheel sharply. They made a U turn across the bow of the *Monte Carlo* and began to drift back. The port side of the ship loomed above them. Several feet above the water line an iron door stood ajar. Popeye let the waterbug rub along the rusty steel plates, used a boat hook to brake them up under the door. Then he reached and, snapping the boat hook over the hinge, pointed up.

"Aw, Guts!" Wimpy wailed. "Let's go back!"

"Up," Keegan said. He boosted the little man, who finally scrambled into the hold. Diggins grumbled and struggled for several seconds, disappeared. Then Keegan went up under his own power, using his arms and shoulders. He watched Popeye drift soundlessly away.

"I bet this is a damn-fool stunt." said Diggins.

Keegan said nothing. He shooed them up an iron stairway, on which Diggins slipped, staining the leg of his tux pants. They reached a lower deck and followed an aisle toward the sound of rumba music. A stateroom door opened and a disheveled, almost nude, very drunk woman stared out slack-jawed at them. A fat man in pink shorts pulled her away and slammed the door. Farther along there was another incident, less amusing and more thought provoking. Two uniformed stewards hove into sight, wrestling with a very belligerent drunken party in a tuxedo. One of the stewards shamelessly produced a blackjack and laid it over the drunk's ear with the gentle skill of an experienced practitioner. The belligerent party sagged instantly and was given the heave-ho into an empty stateroom. The sap swinger pocketed the key, glaring uncivilly at Keegan and his friends.

Keegan returned the glare, then nodded at the stairs. They came upon the rumba music in the flesh—five swarthy, dull-eyed young men in pantaloons and satin blouses. Also voluptuously undulating couples which they threaded. The check room was a welcome discovery. They checked their telltale outer garments. Guts patted his pockets, indicating the gaming room.

"Yeah, cripes," Wimpy said. "Let's get it over with!"

"Forward, men!" admonished Diggins. "Faint heart—" His chestnut was lost in the babble effervescing from the gambling hell.

"Some crowd!" Wimpy shouted.

"Better for us!" Keegan called back.

"Ryan has him a gold mine here," Diggins observed sagely.

"We will mine us some pay dirt!" Keegan grinned.

"Sh! There's Deep Sea Jim!" Diggins leaned toward the far door, where a tall, spare man dressed in well-cut gray cashmere was greeting customers. Ryan's movements were casual and self-assured, almost studied. The iron-claw-in-a-kid-glove type. They watched him walk gracefully to a door marked "Office" and disappear.

"No sign of our fat friend," Keegan said.

"Yet!" Wimpy added.

Keegan pushed him toward one of the side tables and tackled the center layout himself. The suckers ganged in schools here. It was a struggle to make bets. Keegan liked that. Plenty of action meant a reasonably honest wheel. With a great variety of wagers riding every spin there was neither the opportunity nor reason to gaff the wheel. The natural odds and lively action gave the house all it wanted. Finally, the feverish activity prevented the croupiers from watching an individual player too closely.

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KEEGAN tendered a spade-faced croupier two century notes with the proper air of casualness, received twenty ten-dollar counters, and began laying them out on various combinations. He was a shrewd gambler who understood and respected percentages. His manner was detached, indifferent. But his heavy-lidded eyes missed nothing. He rung the bell on his favorite number, thirty-three, twice, stayed well ahead with his hedge bets on the colors.

Eventually bigger money began to show at the table. Two Hollywood celebrities, together with their wives, had decided to give the wheel a play. Keegan played with greater concentration. Within ten minutes his supply of counters had become too bulky to manage—which was what he wanted.

"Something larger, please," he requested. The croupier traded him five yellow chips for fifty tens.

Keegan noted with satisfaction that the design had not been changed. To his observing eye the house chips were exact duplicates in every detail to the counterfeits struck off in San Francisco —or rather vice versa! Warily he worked a phony out of the box in his pocket and ran it in on a color bet. The wager lost and the croupier raked in the phony with a mechanical sweep.

"How you doin', Guts?" Diggins inquired, angling alongside.

"Fortune smirks," Keegan beamed. "And you, my fine-feathered friend?"

"Not bad, not bad," Diggins said cheerily. "Oh, I say, croupier, give me something less bulky!" Doc shoved six stacks of tens across the beige. His smile was appallingly smug.

Diggins was fondling the yellow counters, studying the layout for a preliminary plunge, when a flounderlike hand dropped on his shoulder. It was Starbuck. Starbuck's tanned face was a frame for a mirthless smile, sinister in its whiteness.

"Aw right, wise guy," Starbuck grated through his teeth. "You, too, Keegan."

The two stewards who had liquidated the belligerent drunk loitered close at elbow, apparently hopeful that Keegan might start trouble. He didn't. He followed the group to Ryan's office, where they were joined by Wimpy.

RYAN sat behind a mahogany flat-top desk, quiet, immaculate in his beautifully tailored sack suit. He was signing a check, and after carefully replacing the pen in its onyx well, he glanced up. "Yes?"

Starbuck explained gruffly that the three men in custody were undesirables and how they had got aboard.

"Um!" Ryan said. Then he nodded at Keegan as if he had just seen him and said: "Hello, Keegan, why are you mixed up in this?"

Keegan said guilelessly: "We came down to Long Beach to take you tonight—" He paused there and smiled boyishly, continuing to sift his stack of hundred-dollar chips.

"Yes?" Ryan said.

Keegan went on. "Sucker fever, Ryan. You know how it is. A dime pusher like myself hits a winner at Santa Anita and gets illusions of grandeur. He wants to take his little stake and use it to buck a wheel." He shrugged. "As for the back door—your St. Bernard wouldn't let us on the launch, so we hired a harbor hacker and the back door is where he put us off." He shrugged again, laughing.

Diggins made a swift contribution: "The slugs Starbuck has reference to was merely a gag!" He grinned brightly.

The stewards edged forward, waiting for Ryan to speak.

"I'm sure it was," Deep Sea Jim said quietly.

A dubious look crossed Diggins' eyes. He struggled manfully to maintain his bright front.

Starbuck rumbled: "Boss, you want I should search 'em for more slugs?"

Keegan's fingers continued to stroke the chips only with a prodigious effort of will. He measured the distance to the light switch and calculated the best place to hit Starbuck. The cartons of counterfeit in his pockets seemed suddenly filled with lead.

Deep Sea Jim Ryan stood up. He came around the desk and leaned on it and slid his fingers in the pocket of his suit coat, so that the large, manicured thumbnail lay against the gray material. "I don't think that will be necessary," he said quietly. "Gentlemen, don't take Tiny too seriously. He's a valuable man, but he makes mistakes like the rest of us." Making small talk, Ryan accompanied them to the door and terminated the interview by saying: "Good luck, gentlemen!"

Wimpy made a sound like a punctured tire. "Let's lam!" he suggested urgently.

"Start—shoving—that—queer!" Keegan ordered, twisting the words out of the corner of his mouth.

It was soon done. Diggins and Keegan hit a losing streak, but Wimpy, who was so frightened his hands shook, inadvertently dropped a yellow chip on twenty-nine, which promptly hit to the tune of thirty-five hundred bucks.

Keegan let out a stage whoop, and Diggins echoed it belatedly. People goggled. The Hollywood celebs beamed at Wimpy.

"The little woman would cut my

throat if I didn't make you quit now," Keegan shouted. "Here, I'll help you carry the chips!" He half carried the rubber-legged little man to the cashier's wicket. He nudged Wimpy severely and the little man began to ladle the phony counters out of his pockets. Once Wimpy came up with a scrap of wax paper in which the embosser had packed the counterfeits. Keegan said: "You ought to lay off those chocolates, pal. You are going to wind up with diabetes yet!"

Wimpy's chips stood in neat stacks of ten each—three stacks of Ryan's bona-fide counters and two of the phonies. "Five thousand six hundred and fifty-five dollars," said the cashier factually, calculating the stack of odds. "Any particular way you wish the money, sir?"

"Any way at all," replied Wimpy in a scarcely human voice.

"We'll cash in also," Keegan said, dredging up his stock of counters, phony and otherwise.

"Twenty-three hundred even," said the cashier, accepting the chips and not batting an eye. "Now you, sir—"

When Diggins had been paid off and they were on the way to the check room, Wimpy suddenly went berserk. He did a crazy dance straight to the dice table, flung down a thousand-dollar bill and hurled the dice against the back board. A stunned look came over the crowd at the table. Wimpy had crapped out. While he was trying to untangle another G note, Keegan said softly: "We're going now, little man. Your wife will cut my throat. The boats, Diggins!"

The ride back seemed to require hours. Diggins chattered inanely: Keegan stared into the fog. Wimpy kept rustling his new cabbage leaves.

"Let's get a drink!" proposed Diggins nervously as soon as they reached the landing.

"Nix," said Keegan. They hailed a taxi and drove to their car. "We will drink at the apartment. Big day tomorrow. Need the sleep. For hell's sake, watch those stop lights, Doc!" Diggins had just driven roughshod through a traffic blinker. Keegan admonished him to drive more slowly and settled back to continue his monologue. "Yes, sir, gentlemen, the salad days are over. We will double the size of the deal with Weinowski. A three-way cut on forty thousand smackers! How does that sound? Yep, tomorrow we will ship one hundred tons of scrap metal to the Japanese!"

"One hundred tons!" Diggins echoed. "Ha!"

Wimpy said: "Them poor Chinamen are gonna hafta dodge an awful lotta bullets!"

"There he goes with his philosophy again," Diggins said in a patronizing voice.

"Snap out of it, Wimpy," Keegan said. "You're rich, you damn fool!"

"Them poor chinks," Wimpy gibbered. "Them poor chinks!" The events of the past few hours had been too much for him. He had come apart at the seams.

No night clerk greeted them at the apartment, as was customary. They rode the self-service elevator and went to their room. It had a queer, damp smell to it. Keegan switched on the lights.

Tiny Starbuck sat on a straight-backed chair which he had placed in the entrance to the kitchenette. He was cradling a sawed-off automatic shotgun. Judging from the cavernous aspect of its barrel, the gun was at least twelve gauge.

The two stewards appeared from the bathroom and closet respectively. Each sported a dark-blue .45 automatic. There came a cautious rap on the door and Starbuck called: "O. K., boss, come on in."

DEEP SEA JIM entered the room. He was wearing a moisture-beaded, heather-colored, reversible English topcoat over his sack suit. Fog still dripped from the brim of his sea-green hat. He held three slips of paper torn from the cashier's pad. His quietness had an ominous, deadly quality now. His voice was outwardly still polite as he said: "Almost clever, Keegan. You almost took me." With a gesture that bordered on impatience he set the stewards to searching the three of them for weapons.

"No iron," the sap artist reported. "You want the dough now, boss?"

Ryan waved the man away. "Start coughing it up," Ryan ordered. His calm green eyes ran over the figures on the slips of paper. "I want eleven thousand eight hundred and thirty dollars. That's all I care about."

"Now wait a minute, Jim," Diggins protested. "We had some of our own jack to start with!"

"I want only the amount mentioned," Ryan said. "If you were fools enough to convert all your cash into chips, that's your loss."

Diggins and Wimpy began tossing bills of various denominations on the floor. The stewards kept count. Keegan contributed his wallet. "You win, Ryan," he conceded wearily. "How did you tumble?"

"When the cashier went to put the chips away they stuck together—the phonies, that is. Apparently the shellack hadn't dried, or it wasn't a first-class

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job and the salt air affected it. All there, Marty—good!" Ryan dropped the money into a Manila envelope and buttoned his Burberry. "All right, take it, Tiny, but leave the little squirt out of it."

Tiny Starbuck handed his shotgun to the steward. He shunted Wimpy irritably out of the way and hit Doc Diggins in the belly with a sledge-hammer left. Diggins folded forward and let out a terrible groan. Starbuck raked him with an uppercut. Diggins dropped to a chair, thought better of his position and quickly slid down to the floor, where he lay moaning piteously.

Keegan took it standing up. A couple of Starbuck's punches to the head smashed him back against the wall. The blows to the body didn't bother him so much. He could feel a trickle of blood start down his chin. Starbuck gave that mirthless, toothy grin. He took a deep breath and measured Keegan again.

"All right, Tiny," Deep Sea Jim said quietly. "No point in getting sadistic. Let that desk clerk out of the closet."

Reluctantly the vast blond man obeyed orders. The night clerk, frightened and dumfounded, stared at the shambles in utter disbelief.

"We were afraid our friends might have met with an accident on the way home," Ryan explained. "Fortunate it wasn't serious." He held the door open while his henchmen trudged out.

Diggins breast-stroked his way erect. "What are we gonna eat on?" he demanded.

"The deposit you left on that rent suit, you phony," Ryan smiled. "Good night."

THE END.

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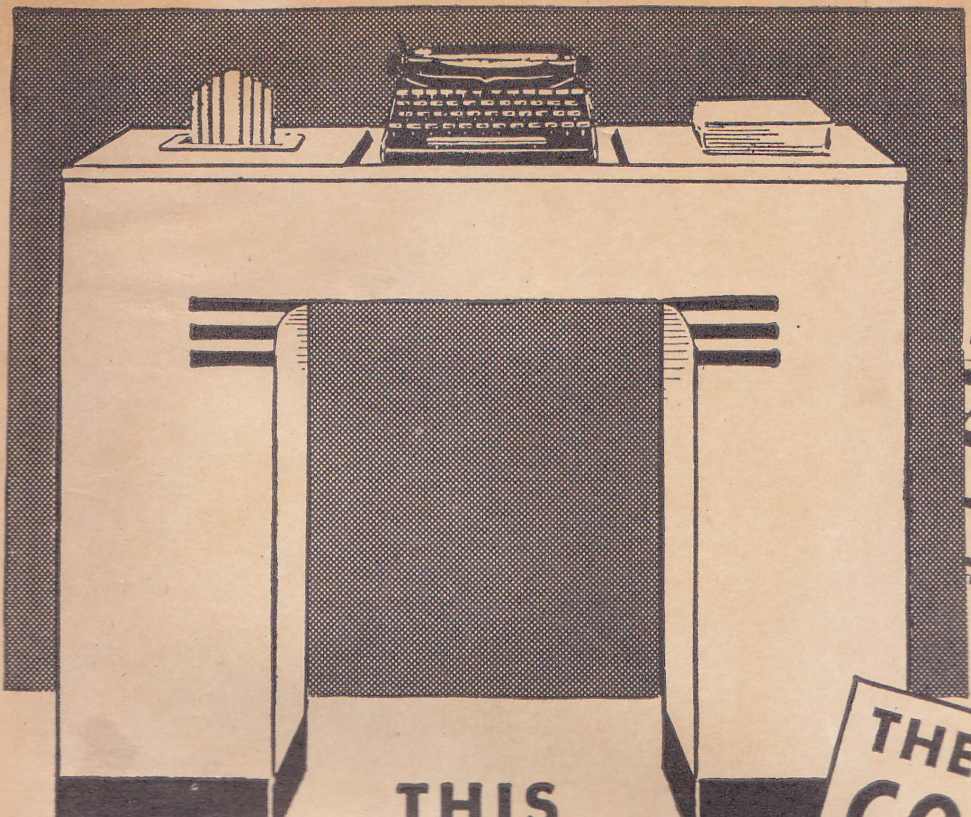

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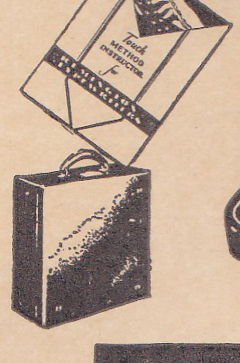

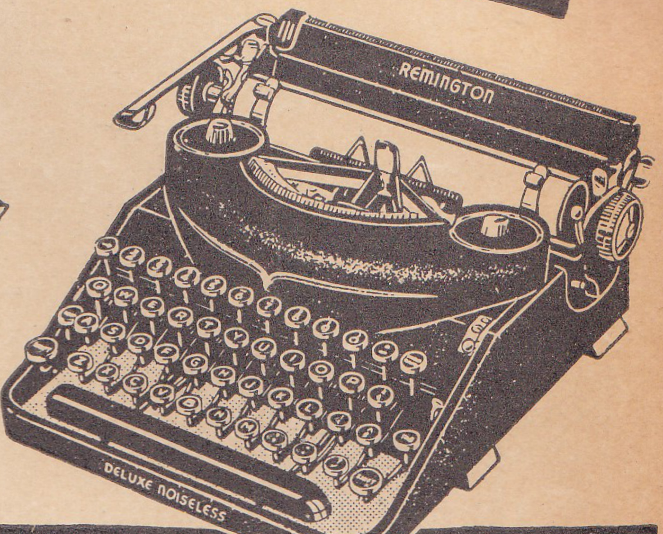

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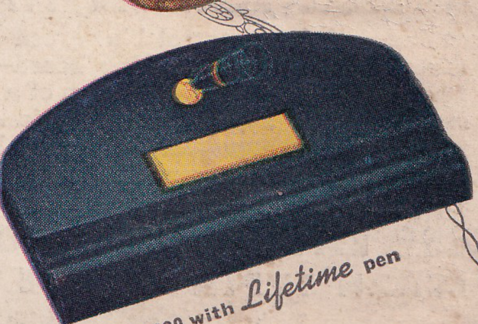
SHEAFFER PENS, ALL COLORS, $2.75 TO $20—PENCILS, $1 UP ENSEMBLES, $3.95 UP

SHEAFFER'S



$20 with *Lifetime* pen

$12.50 with *Lifetime* pen

$12.50 with *Lifetime* pen

$65 with two *Lifetime* pens; Green Brazilian Onyx, $75
—Natural Bronze Cigarette Case—May be engraved

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